आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

—Rigveda, I-89-i

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

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132

TEMPLES AND LEGENDS OF ASSAM

BY

B. K. BARUA

AND

H. V. SREENIVASA MURTHY

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1965

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 2.50.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, *not only in English*, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his

own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the Gita by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata:* "What is not in it, is nowhere". After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths

of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita* which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, QUEEN VICTORIA ROAD, K. M. MUNSHI
NEW DELHI,
3rd October, 1951.

PREFACE

It has been truly said that 'there is no part of India which is more interesting in some respects to the student of Hinduism than the Assam valley'. The fundamental streams of the Brahmanical religion had penetrated into Assam at an early period. Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism held sway in various forms. These cults underwent certain modifications in Assam. It is true especially of Saktism.

In India sculpture, fine arts and literature are closely connected with religion. It is the religion which fostered the growth of temples and images. In Assam also temple building and the arts of architecture and sculpture grew hand in hand with the spread of religion. The erection of temples in Assam goes back to an early century. At any rate, the existence of numerous shrines dedicated to Siva, Surya, Vishnu and Devi and other deities is fully attested to both by inscriptions and contemporary literature. But today not one of these early edifices exist, and the only memorials of ancient times consist of jungle clad mounds scattered in such places as Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Sadiya and a few big temples belonging to a comparatively late period.

The reason for this total obliteration of old-sites, as given by Gait, is that nature has vied with man in destroying them. The Brahmaputra valley

is an alluvial country, and the impetuous, snow-fed rivers which debouch from the Himalayas find so little resistance in its friable soil that they are constantly carving out new channels and cutting away their banks; consequently no building erected in their neighbourhood can be expected to remain for more than limited time, except at few points like Gauhati, Tezpur, where solid rock pierces through the alluvium. Further, though occurring at distant intervals, violent earthquakes are, in Assam, quite as great cause of destruction as fluvial action. A less sudden, but almost equally potent, cause of damage is found in the luxuriant vegetation of the country. Instances are also not wanting where religious zeal led the early Moslem invaders to raze the temples to the ground.

We have, therefore, very little material for the study of temples in Assam although there are quite a few legends. We have here selected some of the important ones and have also added a chapter on Vaisnava religious centres or Satras so as to make them intelligible to those outside Assam.

The book is a joint work of Dr. B. K. Barua and myself. In fact, immediately after the receipt of the letter from the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Dr. Barua invited me to associate with him in the preparation of the work. Before we could take it up, we had to complete the work in hand which was a revision of *A History of Assam* by E. A. Gait. After the completion of it, we took up the present work and prepared the draft. But before we could fina-

lise the draft, Dr. Barua left for U.S.A. as Visiting Professor, in the Indiana University. After his return from the States, we finalised the draft and were about to send it for typing, when suddenly Dr. Barua was taken ill and passed away. Therefore, I have written this preface on the lines we had thought out originally.

I would like to take this opportunity to place on record my deep debt of gratitude to Dr. B. K. Barua for giving me an opportunity to associate myself with this publication. I am grateful to Mrs. B. K. Barua, for kindly permitting me to send the manuscript for publication. I am indebted to Mr. M.S. Prabhakar, M.A., and Mr. G. Rajaram Rao, M.A., Lecturers in English, Gauhati University, for correcting the typescript; to Mr. Divya Kishore Singh, M.Sc., Lecturer in Geography, Gauhati University, for writing the map of Assam showing the sacred religious centres; and to Mr. S. Shankara Jois, M.Sc., Lecturer in Physics, Gauhati University, for helping me in typing the manuscript.

My thanks are due to the Director General of Archæology to the Government of India and to Sri Ganga Prasad Sarma of the Gauhati University Library, who have kindly lent me a few photographs of monuments and permission for the reproduction.

We are thankful to Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, the sponsors of this scheme, for providing us an opportunity to study this problem and to the publishers and authors of works quoted in this book.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.R.A.S.I.	—Annual Report of the Archæological Survey of India.
E.R.E.	—Hasting's Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics.
J.A.R.S.	—Journal of Assam Research Society.
J.A.S.B.	—Journal of Asiatic Society, Bengal.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Assam, with a great and ancient heritage, has contributed richly both to the evolution and enrichment of the civilisation of India. As the frontier province of India on the north-east, Assam has a special position and importance. The boundaries of Assam lie between the latitudes 27° 55′ and 23° North and longitudes 89° 46′ and 96° 10′ East. It contains at present an area of 47,091 square miles, of which 24,414 square miles constitute the plain districts, 22,677 the southern hill tracts.

Assam is a part of the country known in ancient times as Pragjyotisa. By this name the country was known in the great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as well as in some of the principal *Puranas*.

The *Kalika Purana*, a work of the 10th century A.D., says, "Formerly Brahma staying here created the stars; so the city is called Pragjyotisapura, a city equal to the city of Indra".[1] This etymological explanation given by the *Kalika Purana* has been followed by the historians of Assam. Gait writes, "*Prag* means former or eastern and *jyotisa* a star, astrology, shining. Pragjyotisa may be taken to mean the city of Eastern Astrology. The name is interesting in connection with the reputation which

1. 39/126.

valley by the local tribes, in token of their admiration of the way in which the Ahom king first conquered and then conciliated them.[5] B. Kakati suggests that *"Asama"*, "peerless", may be a later-day Sanskritisation of an earlier form, *"Acham"*. In Tai Cham means, "to be defeated". With the Assamese prefix a, Asam would mean "undefeated", "conquerors". If this is its origin, from the people, the name was subsequently applied to the country.[6] However, another derivation has been suggested. "The name (Assam)", observed Baden-Powell, "is most probably traceable to (the Boro) Ha-com the low or level country".[7] In this case, it was the country which gave its name to the people.

Assam is situated in a strategic position, lying in close proximity to Bhutan, Tibet, China, Burma and Pakistan. There are passes through the hills to Bhutan, Tibet, China and Burma. That these routes existed long ago is attested to by the Chinese Buddhist Pilgrim, Yuan Chwang. In the 19th Century A.D., the Burmese invaders followed these routes to Assam and so did the Japanese during the second World War. It may also be noted in this connection that in recent years the Dalai Lama came to India, after the Tibetan uprising, by a route through these hills and that the same route was followed by the Chinese in their naked and unprovoked invasion of India.

These passes and routes played a conspicuous role in shaping the cultural and economic life of

5. Gait; op. cit; p. 331.
6. *Assamese, Its Foundation and Development*, pp. 1-3.
7. *Indian Village Community*, p. 135.

Assam, nay of India. In the first place, they facilitated India's cultural expansion to China and commercial transactions with Central Asia. Secondly, they helped a good deal the movement of the population of the Mongoloid blood, who came and settled in Assam. The Ahoms, who ruled Assam for 600 years and have left a deep impress on various aspects of her history, came to Assam as early as the 13th century A.D., from Thailand.

Assam is covered by many big rivers like Kapili, Dhansiri, Subansiri, Dikhow, Pagladia, and others. But the most important of them all and the one which runs through the heart of the State is the river called in Sanskrit the Brahmaputra or Sri Lauhita. In Assamese it is called Lohit or Luit. It enters the north-eastern corner of Assam through the Mishmi Hills and turning nearly due west, passes through all districts of north Assam. It is the chief artery and high way of Assam. For generations the Assamese have watered their fields with its blessed water; their whole history and culture are intimately connected with the Brahmaputra.

The seasons are marked by the monsoon rains and the climate is generally damp and enervating. The soil is very fertile and the landscape is always green and beautiful due to constant rainfall. Rivers, hills and plains make the State beautiful; the feeling is one of exuberant life.

The earliest inhabitants of Assam are the Austric speakers who began to filter into Assam long anterior to the advent of the Aryans from the west. Their culture still survives in many exist-

ing institutions, customs and manners of the Assamese people.

The next wave of Indo-Chinese invasion is represented by the various peoples speaking Tibeto-Burman languages. The most important group of tribes of the Tibeto-Burman race known as Bodo forms the numerous and most important section of the non-Aryan peoples of Assam. The Bodo group of tribes includes the Koc, the Kachari, the Lalung, the Dimacha, the Garo, the Rabha, the Tipura, the Chutiya and the Maran. The Bodo people who live to the west of the present Kamrup district are called Mec by their Hindu neighbours. Those of them who live in and to the west of the district of Kamrup are called Kāchārī or Kachārī.

The Bodos built strong kingdoms and with various fortunes and under various tribal names—the Chutiya, the Kachari, the Koc, etc., held sway over one or another part of Assam during different historical times. The Koces ruled Assam till the coming of the Britishers. Their kings like Durbala Narayana (13th century A.D.), Naranarayana (16th century A.D.) and Chilaray contributed greatly towards the spread and development of Hindu culture and literature in Assam. The first translation of the Ramayana into Assamese by Madhava Kandali in the 13th century was done at the court of the Kachari king Maha Manikya. In short, the contribution of the Bodos to the Assamese language, religion and culture is, indeed, very great.

In the 13th century A.D. one of the tribes of the Tais or Shans, the Ahoms overran and con-

quered Assam, giving their name to the country. Other Shan tribes who followed the Ahoms were the Khamtis, Phaliyals, Naras, Aitoniyas who mostly inhabit the eastern part of Assam.

The Tibeto-Burman and the Shans today constitute the bulk of the population of Assam, Valley as well as Hills. Risley rightly remarks that the Assamese are unmistakably Mongoloid.[8] Elwin considers them a rather modified Mongoloid with a dolichocephalic or long head but with the typical flat nose, high cheek bones and oblique slit-eyes.[9]

At what period of history the Aryan speakers came into the valley of the Brahmaputra we cannot say. But there is no doubt that they arrived at a fairly early period, as evidenced by the references in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the Nidhanpur Copper plate grant.

The Aryan influence became so widespread and penetrating that even minor Vedic customs and rituals became deep-rooted in the life of the common people. For instance, the Vedic custom of worship of Indra by setting up *Indradhvaja* still survives in Assam in the popular festival of *Bhatheli* (Bhasthali). The existing practice of animal sacrifice by strangling on the *Siva caturdasi* day is also a Vedic survival. It is significant that the Assamese woman's undergarment *mekhela* is a phonetic variation of *mekhala* which was a girdle for woman or *Brahmacari* in Vedic times.[10] But the

8. *The People of India*, Second edition, p. 42.
9. *The Aboriginals*, p. 5.
10. *Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*, Introduction, xxix-xxx, xlvi.

greatest cultural influence of the Aryans which also brought unity among the diverse tribes and races of the province however, was the language. Sanskrit not only became the language of the court, it also became the medium of expression for poets, philosophers and preachers. Modern Assamese as an Aryan speech developed out of the Sanskrit as early as the 10th century A.D.

The language that is spoken by the majority of the people of the State is Assamese. This Aryan language checked the spread of Tibeto-Burmese language in Assam. It, however, took some words from these languages. Assamese is a very developed language and has a good old literature. Modern Assamese language is very vigorous.

The State of Assam has always held a distinct and independent political existence, though her political frontiers have advanced or receded according to her prosperity, and at times her area varied greatly from what it is today. It must, however, be noted that although the political boundaries of the country have changed from age to age, its geographical limits have been marked out by nature in such a manner as to ensure that it retained its cultural identity through ages. The unbroken unity of its history is the result of the geographical unity of the area of the Brahmaputra Valley with the heart of Assam.

CHAPTER II

TEMPLES IN KAMRUP DISTRICT

Kamrup, the modern district of Assam, takes its name from the great independent kingdom of Kamarupa. It is described in the *Kalika Purana* that immediately after Naraka of Mithila became the king of Assam and was placed in charge of the goddess Kamakhya, the name of the province was changed from Pragjyotisa to Kamarupa. The earliest epigraphic references to Kamarupa is however to be found in the well-known Allahabad inscription of Samudragupta, where Kamarupa is mentioned as frontier territory. In classical Sanskrit literature Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa both occur side by side; for instance, in Kalidasa. In the story of Raghu's *digvijaya* as given in the *Raghuvamsa* the hero first came to Pragjyotisa and then to Kamarupa after having crossed the Lauhitya. Yadavaprakasa (c 1000 A.D.) in his *Vaijayanti* mentions Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa (*Pragjyotisa Kamarupa pragjatika*). Rajasekhara (c 900 A.D.) refers to Pragjyotisa as a country and Kamarupa as a mountain. The Jain lexicographer, Hemachandra (c. 1200 A.D.) says, "the Pragjyotisas are Kamarupas." Purusottama also states that Pragjyotisa is Kamarupa. Yasodhara (c. 1300 A.D.), the author of the *Jayamangala* commentary on the *Kamasutra* places Kamarupa as a country of the

eastern region *(gauda Kamarupakah pracya visesah)*. The *Manjusri-mula-kalpa* puts it near the Himalayas.

In some of the later Puranas the name appears in a different context. The *Siva Purana* states that in Sahyadri there was a country named Kamarupa which was conquered by a Raksasa named Bhima. Both *Vayu* and *Brahmanda Puranas* referring to the mountain Devakuta and their dwellers, mention the Kamarupa Raksasas.

Yuan Chwang called it Ka-mo-lu-p'o, Alberuni called the place Kamru. Mahommedan conquerors referred to it as Kamru or Kamrud. The *Bauddha-Gan-O-Doha* and the *Haragauri-Samvada* mention it as Kamaru.

The *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra,* both connected with the religious history and geography of mediaeval Assam, describe the country as Kamarupa. The name Kamarupa according to the legends of these texts is associated with Kamadeva, the god of love. It is here that Kama was sent by the gods to put an end to Siva's mourning after the death of his consort and to awaken in him again the passion of creation. He was burnt to ashes at the angry glance of the great god, but later recovered his original form *(rupa);* so the name Kamarupa.

Sambhunetragninirdagdhah Kamah Sambhoranugrahat
Tatra rupam yatah prapya Kamarupam tato bhavet
(*Kalika Purana,* Ch. 51).

During the mediaeval period Kamarupa became a centre of Tantric worship. According to

popular belief Kamarupa (Assam) was the home of Saktism. "The birth place of Saktism as a definite sect," writes Eliot, "seems to have been north-eastern India.....Its present sphere of influence is still chiefly Bengal and Assam."[1] H. H. Wilson in the preface to his translation of *Vishnu Purana* says: "It is a singular and uninvestigated circumstance that Assam, or at least the north-east of Bengal, seems to have been in a great degree the source from which the Tantrika and Sakti corruptions of the religion of the Puranas proceeded."[2]

It is too well known that from time immemorial, India is the home of the worship of the *Prakrti* or later Sakti, Goddess Prithvi and a host of Gramadevatas, like Amba, Mata, etc. The most prominent Deity of the Indus Valley people is the Mother of men, animals and plants. In historic period we are familiar with a large number of goddesses. It is very probable that there once existed the conception of a great Mother Goddess who became the prototype of diverse and subsequent emanations.[3]

Sakti is the concept of Divine Energy in its dynamic aspect. She is inseparable from Brahman, as She is the power of Existence, Knowledge and Bliss of Brahman. She is the creative and preservative energy of Brahman. As the *Saundaryalahari* says: "Siva, when he is united with Sakti, He is able to create; otherwise He is even unable to move. Siva without Sakti is Sava, a corpse. Sakti

1. *Hinduism and Buddhism*; Vol. II, p. 78.
2. *Vishnu Purana*, p. cvii.
3. Quoted from R. K. Mukherji's *Culture and Art of India*.

is the life of Siva as she is his wife. The whole world of matter and soul exist potentially in Sakti. Maya or *Prakriti*, the matrix of the world, lies with Sakti. The souls mistake themselves as finite and many due to the influence of Maya. Liberation is due to the knowledge that the so-called soul is non-different from Brahman. Knowledge of Sakti leads to this knowledge. Liberation means dissolution in the Blissful effulgence of the Supreme."[4] The *Devi Bhagavata* has expressed the same idea as follows:

I call to the mind the Mother of the whole universe
Who has created this world both real and unreal
And who by Her own power with three Gunas
Protect it having destroyed it, She then plays.
Commonly it is said that Brahma creates the Universe
Yet the learned in the Veda and Purana
Speak of His birth from the naval lotus of Murari;
Although it is said He creates, yet He is Himself dependent there-in.
Even Murari, in the bossoms of whose naval lotus Brahman was born
Deeply sleeps upon His serpent bed at the time of dissolution,
Therefore, Ananta, with His thousand hoods, His support,
How can He who is Himself supported
Be called a leader in the creation of the world?

4. Tr. C. D. Sharma; *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, p. 390.

Even water of the ocean which is liquid substance,
Cannot exist without a container, therefore,
I take refuge with Her, the Mother of all beings,
Who exists in all things in the form of power.
Brahma in the lotus
Seeing the eyes of Visnu were closed in deep slumber
Prayed to the Devi with whom I take shelter."[5]

Therefore, "She is Brahman and Paratpara, Supreme of the Supreme."[6]

The Tantric rituals in their debased form were practised in Assam prior to the Vaisnava revival. In the mediaeval period, some of the Ahom monarchs also patronised Saktism. However, during this period the cult of Sakti was mostly supported by the aristocracy. But when it came to be associated with magic and charm a large section of people came under its influence. Its importance was further increased when the idea that an adept could perform miracles gained ground. Inscriptions are, on the whole, silent about the Sakti worship in Assam, although some references are there in the inscriptions of Vanamala and Ratnamala to the temples of Kameswari Mahagauri and Mahagauri Kameswari.

The heyday of Saktism in Assam which began in the mediaeval period lasted down to the 18th century. *Yogini Tantra* gives accounts of *mantras*, *Sadhana* (evocation of the Deity), *Pujana*

5. Avelon's Translation.
6. Eliot, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 78-79.

(worship), *Puraskriya* (preparatory rite), *Mudra, Bali, Homa, Dhyana, Stotra* and *Kavaca* (charm).

The *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra* enjoin blood sacrifices and various esoteric rites. The ritual consisted of human sacrifices which is horribly superstitious. Its essential feature is known as *Pancha Tattva* or the five elements, the *Panca Makaras*, the five 'M's, because they begin with that letter, namely, *Madya*, (wine), *Mamsa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Mudra* (parched grain), and Maithuna (copulation). They also sought salvation through sexual intercourse with women. The *Kalika Purana* also speaks of Virgin Goddess of beauty and sex. In the selection of Virgin no caste distinction was observed. "The ambition of every pious follower of this system", says Dr. Bhandarkar, "is to become identical with Tripura Sundari and one of his religious exercises is to habituate himself to think that he is a woman and it ought to be the aim of all to become a woman."[7]

The mode of worship of Goddess Tripura Sundari "consists in the worship of a picture of the female organ drawn in the centre of another consisting of a representation of nine such organs, the whole of which forms the Sricakra. The pictures are drawn on a *Bhurja* leaf or on a piece of silken cloth or on a gold leaf. With reference to this worship it must be observed that there are two classes of Saktas; (1) *Kaulika* and (2) *Samayin*. The former worship the gross material object, while

7. *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems:* p. 164.

the latter have recourse to imagery. The worship of the pictures just mentioned is resorted to by ancient *(purva) Kaula*, while the modern *(uttara) Kaulas* worship the organ of a living beautiful woman. The *Kaulas* worship their Goddess by offering to her and themselves using wine, flesh, honey, fish and such other things. The *Samayins* of course abstain from such practices. There are even Brahmanas who secretly profess the doctrines of the Sakta school and worship the Goddess Tripura Sundari in accordance with the *Purva-Kaula* or *Uttara-Kaula* way. There are no distinctions of caste when the worship of the Bhairavicakra is going on. Men of all castes become Brahmanas, but they resume their own caste when the worship is over."[8]

In this gross form of worship was also included the offering of blood to the Devi. The *Kalika Purana* contains a very lengthy list of sacrificial animals to Candika and Bhairava. It included "birds, rhinoceros, antelopes, alligators, fish, tortoises, ichneumons, wild boars, iguanas, reindeer, lions, tigers."[9] A man without a blemish, it is stated, is the most acceptable sacrifice that can be offered, and the manner in which the victims are to be dealt with is laid down with full details.

Instances are on record to show how offerings were made to the Goddess in the form of blood drawn from sacrificer's own body. The *Katha-Guru-Carita* gives an account of a Koc official named

8. Bhandarkar, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 146-147.
9. *Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, p. 69.

Govinda who worshipped the Devi at the cost of everyone of his belongings. He then used to take out his blood with a small clipper and offer it to the Devi in shells of snails, as a result of which his body turned as white as cotton.[10] This was also accompanied by wine drinking and divination by ripping open the entrails of a pregnant woman.

The Moslem chroniclers observed that "whoever happens to step into the land becomes enchanted and cannot find his way to come out of it. The idol temple of Kamakhya. Lunachumari and Ismail Jogi are notorious for magic and sorcery." The Bahiristan gives the following account of the Khuntaghat Pargana, a great centre of witchcraft: This place is notorious for magic and sorcery. Thus if a man takes by force a fowl from a ryot, comes to the judge for redress, and if that person is refused justice, then the complainant, by means of his magic and sorcery could make the accused produce the voice of a fowl from inside his stomach and thus proves the falsity of the protestation of the accused. If a Bailiff of the judge stayed at a village in connection with the work of Dihidar or the Pattadar (the tenure-holder of the village), and if in a state of drunkenness he would demand fish with violence in the evening or at mid-night when no fish was available, and persisted in his demand by torturing the ryots, then they would bring some mango leaves (or another tree whose name reads like Lahsura) and breathe on the leaves some words

10. Quoted from M. Neog: *Shankaradeva and His Times* (unpublished) p. 108.

of magic and sorcery. These leaves would forthwith turn into a kind of fish. When these fishes were cooked by him in a state of drunkenness, they would turn into blood. As soon as they were eaten by the Bailiff he would die. Muhammad Zaman (an oppressive revenue officer) was bewitched by some person, so that for two or three days he used to produce sounds of beasts like dogs, cats and other animals of their class, and thus he died.

"It is the custom of the Assamese that whenever they engage in a war they perform some sacrifices a day previous to the battle in the following way:—They send some magic object floating down the river towards the enemy's side. If it floats towards the enemy's side, they take it as a good omen. If it travels upstream out of its own accord, they take it as foreboding something against them and consider it as a sign of their defeat and they do not go out to battle. In short (at the time of war of Hajo), according to that custom, they built one raft of plantain tree which is a well known fruit in India, and performed *Pujas*, i.e., worship of devils on it in the following manner. They sacrificed a black man, a dog, a cat, a pig, an ass, a monkey, a he-goat and a pigeon, all black. Their heads were collected together and placed on the raft along with many ripe bananas, *pan* (betel-leaf), betel-nut, *chuwa* (*acanthophyllum squarrosum*). various kinds of scents, rice-paste coloured red, yellow and green, cotton seeds, mustard seeds, mustard oil *(raughan-i-talkh)*, ghee, *(raughan-i-zard)*, and *sindur* (vermillion), and then the raft was pushed

adrift. Though they tried to make it float down the stream it did not go and every time it returned towards them. Their augury proved to be inauspicious, and it was therefore inadvisable on their part to come to the battle."[11]

At about this time there was a class of persons called *Bhogis*, who were voluntary victims of a Goddess named Ai who dwelt in a cave and announced from time to time that the Goddess had called them. When She did so, they were treated as privileged persons and were allowed to do whatever they liked. Every woman was at their command. But they were killed when the annual festival came round.[12]

As a frontier region Assam appears to be a veritable asylum for all kinds of uncanny beliefs and superstitions. Since early times the province happened to be a meeting ground of the Austric, Dravidian, Aryan, and Sino-Tibetan speakers, and thus the aboriginal beliefs, cults, and myths of these races and tribes mingled together as if in a witch-cauldron and formed the foundation of the orthodox religion of the Tantras. For these reasons, Assam in the mediaeval period became a fertile soil for the Tantric worship. Of the four *pithas* or sacred places, namely Kamakhya, Srihatta, Purnagiri and Uddiyana associated with Buddhist Tantric worship and mentioned in *Sadhanamala*, two namely, Kamakhya and Srihatta belonged to Assam. The

11. M. I. Borah: *Five Lectures on the History of Assam as Told by Moslem Historians;* p. 49.
12. Gait: *A History of Assam;* p. 58.

temple of Kamakhya in Gauhati was, and still is considered to be, the most sacred of the *Sakti pithas* in India. It is a place of the Mother Goddess, Kamakhya, and seems to have been the scene of tribal worship. The Garos with their matriarchal form of society are generally mentioned as having been the guardians of this religious centre prior to its reclamation by the Hindus under the care of King Virasimha.

1. KAMAKHYA

The temple of Kamakhya is situated on a hill three miles off from Gauhati, the headquarters of the Kamrup District. It is about eight hundred feet above sea level. There is a small township on the hillock consisting of some 200 families who are mostly connected with the temple. It has certain modern facilities; there is a Post Office and educational institutions upto High School standard. It is also proposed to construct a hospital there.

The fine road which can be used for light vehicular traffic and the stone pathway connect the foot of the hill with the top. Buses ply every 10 or 15 minutes from Gauhati to the foot of the hill from where one can go to the top by taxies that are readily available at the bus stop.

Kamakhya seems to be a new name of the goddess and she does not appear in the early literature. Dr. B. Kakati gives evidence for thinking that the word is non-Sanskritic in origin. He has equated the word with some similar Austric formations, which mean ghost or dead body. He further

suggests that Kamakhya was formerly, a goddess of ghosts and spirits, who was worshipped in a *smasana* or cremation ground.

The name of the hillock where the shrine stands is called Nilachala (blue mountain). This name is associated with legend which is happily preserved to us in the *Kalika Purana* in the chapter on Daksa Yajna. According to this source, when King Daksa, the father of Parvati (Sati), instituted a great sacrifice, he sent invitation to all his daughters and the gods and sages, except his eldest daughter Parvati and Siva, his son-in-law, as he disliked them. This dislike was due to the fact that in spite of his opposition Parvati married Siva, whose peculiar habits and quite irrelevant attitude were not favoured by him. Parvati however, came to learn about the performance of the sacrifice through Narada. She further learnt from Narada that all her sisters with their husbands had gone there. She very much desired to see her parents as well as her sisters and also wanted to know from her father what made him to adopt such a negligent attitude towards her and her husband. Therefore, with the permission of her husband, Parvati journeyed to her father's place uninvited. But to her utter dismay she found her father none too happy at her arrival. This was naturally discouraging to Parvati, who was further mortified to find that no necessary arrangement was made for the reception of Siva although great care was taken to assign places of honour to all other gods. When she asked her father why Siva was so much neglect-

ed by him, Daksa, without making secret of his displeasure started abusing Siva. At this discourtesy shown to her husband, she burst out saying:—

"Who except you can be hostile to Siva, who is free from enmity and is the soul of all, whom none can excel in this world, and who, being the dear self of embodied beings, knows no favourite or otherwise?.....The most generous men feel inclined to magnify the smallest virtues, but you discovered vice in there. It is no wonder that great men always censure with intolerance those wicked people who hold that the body (itself) is the soul; .....Alas, you, an unlucky person, hate that Siva of holy fame and inviolable command whose disyllabic name (Siva), pronounced for even a single time in the course of conversation, immediately destroys one's sin! You revolt against that friend of all whose lotus-feet shower blessings on the supplicating world.....Did Brahma and the gods, other than yourself, who hold on their crests the (flowers) touched by his feet, not know that God named Siva as an inauspicious being who lived with goblins on the cremation ground, spreading out his matted hair and wearing the garlands, ashes and skulls of that place? If incapable (of redress), one should leave the place by closing one's ears when the Lord (Siva), the protector of religion *(dharma)* is freely decried by men; but if capable, one should tear out by force the denouncing tongues of the wicked and then give up one's own life—that is *dharma*. So, I shall no longer sustain the body produced from you who censure the dark-throated (Nilakanta), be-

cause, as people say, the vomiting out of the condemned food eaten through mistake leads to purification."

Then Parvati took her seat on the ground, closed her eyes, and reduced her body to ashes by the yogic fire produced internally by abstract meditation on Siva.[13]

Siva, overcome by grief, destroyed Daksa's sacrifice[14] and wandered hither and thither in frantic sorrow carrying her dead body on his head. Brahma and other gods grew alarmed and approached Visnu to put a stop to Siva's penance and save the world from destruction. Brahma, Visnu and Sani then conspired to deprive Siva of his wife's body and free him from infatuation. These three gods, thereupon, entered into the dead body of Sati and disposed of it limb by limb.

Atha sokavimudhatma vilapan vrsabhadhvajah
Jagama pracyadesamstu skandhe krtva satisavam
Unmattavadgacchatosya drstva bhavam divaukasah
Brahmadyascintayamasuh savabhramsanakarmani
Haragatrasya samsparsacchavo nayam visirnatam
Gamisyati katham tasmadasya bhramso bhavisyati
Iti sancintayantaste Brahmavisnusanaiscarah
Satisavantarvivisuradrsya yogamayaya
Pravisyatha savam devah Khandasaste satisavam
Bhutale patayamasuh sthane visesatah.

(*Kalika Purana*, Ch. 18).

13. Quoted from *Great Women of India*, pp. 232-233.
14. "It may be worth mentioning, as a picturesque circumstance, that when the woods on the southern slopes of the Bhutan and Aka hills catch fire in the dry winter season, and can be seen glowing or blazing from great distances, the people to this day assert that the far-off glare against the sky is caused by the rising ashes of Daksa's interrupted sacrifice." Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. II, p. 132.

The places where pieces of Sati's body fell are said to have become pithas i.e., sacred places for worship of the goddess in her different forms and as much of the eastern land as was covered by wandering Siva with Sati's body on his shoulder should be regarded as sacrificial land *(Yajnodaka desah)*. The early Puranas and the Tantras, however, make mention only of the four important pithas *(catus pitha)*. For example, the Buddhist work the *Hevajra Tantra*, a fairly early work of the 8th century A.D. mentions (1) Jalandhara, (2) Odiyana, (3) Purnagiri and (4) Kamarupa. The *Kalika Purana* also refers to this traditional list of catus pitha, namely, (i) Odra, seat of goddess Katyayani and Jagannatha, in the west, (ii) Jalasaila, seat of the goddess Candi and God Mahadeva, in the north, (iii) Purna or Purnasaila (Purnagiri), seat of goddess Purnesvari and god Mahanatha, in the south, and (iv) Kamarupa, seat of Kamesvari and Kamesvara, in the east.

Odrakhyam prathamam pitham dvitiyam jalasailakam
Tritiyam purnapithantu kamarupam caturthakam
Odrapitham pascime tu tathaivoddresvarim sivam
Katyayanim jagannathamodresinca prapujayet
Uttare pujayet pitham prasastam jalasailakam
Jalesvaram mahadevam candim jalesvarim tatha
Dirghikancogracandanca tatraiva paripujayet
Daksine purnasailantu tatha purnesvarim sivam
Purnanatham mahanatham sarojamatha candikam
Pujayeddamanidevim santamapi tatha sivam
Kamarupam mahapitham tatha kamesvarim sivam
Nilanca parvatasrestham natham Kamesvaram tatha
Pujayeddvari purve tu kramadetamstu bhairava

(*Kalika Purana*, Ch. [illegible]

Sarvadevaih sarvatirthaih sarvaksetraistathaiva ca
Etadvyaptam kamarupam natonyadvidyate param
Idam pitham samasadya devatvam yanti manavah
Amrtattvam ganatvanca tatra sakto yamo rahi.
(*Kalika Purana*, Ch. 81).

The *Sadhanamala*, another Buddhist text, substitutes Srihatta (Sylhet) for Jalandhara or Jalasaila. The *Kalika Purana* in another chapter, however, refers to seven pithas, namely, (1) Devikuta, where Sati's two feet fell and where the Devi is Mahabhaga; (2) Uddiyana, where the two thighs fell and where the Devi is Katyayini; (3) Kamagiri in Kamarupa, where the *pudendum muliebre* fell and the Devi is Kamakhya; (4) a locality in the eastern border of Kamarupa where the naval fell and where the Devi is Dikkaravasini; (5) Jalandhara, where the two breasts fell and where the Devi is Candi; (6) Purnagiri, where the neck and the shoulders fell and where the Devi is Purnesvari; and (7) a place on the borders of Kamarupa where the head fell and where the Devi is Lalitakanta. To quote the text:—

Devikute padayugmam prathamam nyapatat ksitau
Uddiyane coruyugmam hitaya jagatam tatha
Kamarupe kamagirau nyapatat yonimandalam
Tatraiva nyapatad-bhumau purvato nabhi mandalam
Jalandhare stanayugmam svarnaharavibhusitam
Amsagrivam purnagirau kamarupattatah sirah
Yavadbhuvam gate bhargah samadaya satiravam
Pracyesu yajniko desastavadeva prakirttitah

*** *** ***

Yatra yatrapatan satyastadapada devijah
Yatra tatra mahadevah svayam lingasvarupadhrk

*** *** ***

Devikute mahadevi mahabhageti giyate
Satipadayuge lino yoganidra jagatprabhuh
Katyayini coddiyake kamakhya kamarupini
Purnesvari purnagirau candijalandhare girau
Purvante kamarupasya devi dikkaravasini
Tatha lalitakanteti yoganidra pragiyate
(*Kalika Purana*, Ch. 18).

It is noteworthy that of these seven pithas, no less than three are in Kamarupa. The *Yogini Tantra* says that different pithas were considered specially sacred in different Yugas and Kamarupa burst into prominence in the Kali Age:

Uddiyanasya devesi pradurbhavah kritayuge
Purnasailasya Sambhutistretayuge mukhebhavat
Dvapare Jalasailasya Kamakhya sa Kalau Yuge
Ghorasya Kalipapasya Vinasaya mahesvari.

The fact that the Puranas and the Tantras have given much prominence to Kamarupa pitha alone suggests that Kamarupa became unrivalled centre of Tantric worship by absorbing the popularity of their *Yoni-tirthas* of ancient India at a fairly early date.[15]

By the time of the compilation of these texts pilgrimage had grown all over the province from Karatoya to Brahmakunda. These sacred places are very ingenuously described by the author of the *Kalika Purana* in alluding to the visit of Betala and Bhairava in Kamarupa. Every river, spring or hill was considered to be holy and seat of gods and goddesses. In this connection the following verses

15. D. C. Sircar, *The Saktapithas*, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Letters, Volume XIV, No. 1, 1948, p. 15.

from the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra* are significant:

Tatsama Kamarupe tu sarvatraiva jale sthale
Sarvasrestho yatra Visnurlaksmih sarvottama yatha
Devipuja tatha sasta Kamarupe Suralaye
Deviksetram Kamarupam Vidyatenyam—na tatsamam
Anyatra virala Devi Kamarupe grhe grhe.
(*Kalika Purana*, Ch. 58).

Jale sthale Kamarupe pujananca samam phalam
Kamarupe yatha Visnuh sarvasrestha Laksmi Mahesvari
Kamarupe tatha devi-puja sarvottama smrta
Kamarupam deviksetram kutrapi tat samam na ca
Anyatra virala Devi Kamarupe grhe grhe.
(*Yoginitantra*, II/V. 150).

As mentioned before, the genital organ of Sati fell on the Nilachala. The mountain represented the body of Siva himself and when Sati's genital organ fell on it the mountain turned blue. The goddess herself is called Kamakhya, because she came there secretly to satisfy her amour (*kama*) with Siva. Thus "the mountain became both a graveyard and a secret love-tryst of the goddess."

Kamarupa pitha (Kamakhya) is also known as Yonipitha. : Also:

Yonipitham kamagirau kamakhya tatra devata
Yatraste trigunatita raktapasanarupini
Yatraste madhavah saksadumanande-tha bhairavah
Sarvada vihareddevi tatra muktirna samsayah
Tatra sribhairavidevi tatra ca ksetradevata
Pracandacandika tatra matangi tripurambika
Vagala kamala tatra bhavanesi sadhumini.
(*Pithanirnaya*)[16].

16. Quoted from D. C. Sircar's *The Sakta Pitham*, Op. Cit., pp. 47-49.

It is indeed curious to note that the temple of Kamakhya is unique when compared with the Devi temples in other parts of India, for it enshrines no image of the goddess. There is a cave within the temple, in a corner of which stands a block of stone on which the symbol of a *yoni* is printed. The *yoni* symbol, so sculptured, is kept moist from the oozings of a natural spring within the cave. The devotees touch it and offerings of the flowers and leaves are made on it.

The origin of the creative symbolism of the *yoni* has been differently interpreted by different texts. While the *Kalika Purana* gives an amorous interpretation of the *yoni,* the *Yogini Tantra* emphasises its creative symbolism. Devi herself is said to have asked Siva to explain who Kamakhya was and he relates the following story about the origin of Kamakhya:

"In the primeval times Brahma after having created the universe arrogated to himself the supreme creative force. The goddess noticed this arrogance of Brahma and created out of her own body a demon named Kesi. As soon as born the demon rushed towards Brahma to swallow him up. Brahma fled in terror in the company of Visnu. The demon then built a city called Kesipura and began to harass the three worlds. There was all around the echo of a sound—'Kill Brahma'. Brahma cast aside his vanity and in the company of Visnu offered a hymn of propitiation to Kali for the relief of the worlds from the tyranny of Kesi. The goddess was satisfied and confessed that the demon was her

own creation for the punishment of Brahma for his arrogance. She then uttered the syllable of destruction *'hum'* and burnt up the demon to ashes." She then spoke to Brahma thus:

Bho Brahmana srunu vasvetadvacanam me subhodayam
Kesi Daitya vadarthaya yatrame pujanam kritam
Yuvabhyam tatra pasyadhvam jatam me yonimandalam
Mamatejah subhutbhutam janihi yonimandalam
Sarvesamudbhavashthanam yonireva na samsayah
Janihi prakritim deva yonimetantu mamakim
Sapujya yonim devesa sristhi kuru yatarthatah
Saduyoipiya bhyam nasatu tava vyapi pitamaha
Tavanyesam hitarthaya stapitam yonimandalam
Prithivyam Bharatavarse Kamarupam mahaphalam
Navayonim samakirna mahamukti phalam pradam
Navayonyatmake Brahman Kamarupe manoharam
Kamakhya tejasadevi dipyate yonimandalam.

As a free rendering has it: Brahma was to create a mountain out of the ashes of Kesi, the burnt demon, to deliver him from the sin of ignorance and arrogance. The mountain should be of moderate size, being not too high nor too low. It should also be covered with edible grass for cattle all over. Brahma's sin would be reduced in proportion to the quantity of the grasses grazed by cattle. And the spot wherefrom the gods propitiated the Devi for the destruction of demon Kesi, there was springing up in their very presence a *yoni* circle out of her own creative energy and it should be regarded as the source and origin of all things. In future, Brahma should create after having contemplated the *Yoni*. But just then Brahma was debarred from seeing the *Yoni* until by his penance and purifica-

tion he had brought down a luminous light from the sky and placed it on the *Yoni* circle. For his good as well as for the good of the whole world she had created the *Yoni* circle and placed it in Kamarupa.[17] As per the directions of Devi, Brahma created a mountain called *Govardhana* (cattle nourisher) and planted a *tulasi* there.

There are also legends associating Siva and Naraka with the construction of the temple on the place where the genital organ of Sati fell. According to Puranic legends, Kama, the Indian Cupid, was sent by the gods to put an end to Siva's mourning after the death of his consort, Sati, and to awaken in him again the passion of creation. At this Siva grew furious and Kama was burnt to ashes by the angry glance of the great god. Rati, the wife of Kama, prayed to Siva that her husband be brought back to life. On his being pacified, Siva brought Kama back to life shorn of all his original grace and beauty. Siva, however, agreed to restore him to his former self if they erected a temple on the genital part of Sati. This being done, Kama was restored to his original state. So according to this legend the original temple was constructed by the gods themselves with the help of Visvakarma.

For the construction of the tank on the Nilachala and the stone pathway, we have to turn to the Naraka legend. According to *Harivamsa* and *Kalika Purana*, Naraka was born to Bhumi (Mother Earth) by Visnu and the child was deposited on the sacrificial ground of King Janaka, its head being

17. B. Kakati; *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, pp. 37-38.

According to the above accounts, the temple of Kamakhya seems to have existed from hoary antiquity. The original temple was destroyed in the early part of the 16th century A.D., by the vandalism of the iconoclast Kalapahar. The story goes that Kalapahar was originally a Brahmana by name Rajiv Lochan Roy. He was ostracised from the Brahmana fold when he married the daughter of Badshah Suleiman Kararani of Bihar. Even after the marriage Rajiv Lochan Roy desired to live as a Brahmana and even went to Puri, perhaps to undergo purifactory ceremony. The Brahmanas there refused to oblige him, whereupon he became a staunch Mohammadan and took the new name of Kalapahar. He determined to avenge the humiliation suffered by him at the hands of the Brahmanas by destroying Hindu temples. He organised an army, efficient and well equipped, invaded Kamarupa, and sacked the temple of Kamakhya, the ruins of which are still seen scattered all over the hill. He also sacked the Jagannath temple at Puri.

The present temple was rebuilt by Naranarayan, one of the illustrious kings of the Koc kingdom, in 1565 A.D. How the temple came to be reconstructed is narrated in the following story. When the Koc King Naranarayan invaded Bengal, the Koc army suffered serious reverses in which the brother of Naranarayan, Chilarai, was taken prisoner by the Sultan of Bengal. It is stated that while Chilarai was sleeping in the prison cell, he dreamt a dream in which he was told that his capture was due to the fact that he entered into war

with the Sultan of Bengal without rebuilding the ruined temple of Kamakhya. He was assured that he would be released soon when he cured the mother of the Sultan who would be bitten by a snake. The dream became true. The mother of the Sultan was bitten by a snake and all the frantic efforts made by the Sultan to save her life were of no avail. At last he sent for Chilarai who cured her of the snake bite. The Sultan was immensely pleased and ordered his release.

After his release from prison, Chilarai set himself to the task of the reconstruction of the Kamakhya temple. He deputed his general Megha Mukudum for this work and the shrine was rebuilt in about six months' time. It is said that as the stone work collapsed, it was built by bricks that were baked in *ghee*. Both the brothers, Naranarayan and Chilarai, took part in the dedicatory ceremony of the temple and according to the *Vamsavali* the king offered three lakhs of *hom* and one lakh sacrifices and dedicated to the temple the families of 140 *paiks*, for service in the temple. Besides giving lands, fisheries, musical instruments, utensils of gold, silver, copper and bell-metal, mace throne and white chameri, the King gave as *shebaits* or *paiks*, families of Brahmanas, Ganaks, Nats, Bhats, Tantis, Malis, Kamars, Kahars, Barhoi (carpenters), washermen, oil-pressers, sweet-meat makers, goldsmiths, potters, leather-workers, fishermen and scavengers.[19] King Naranarayan also caused the sta-

19. K. L. Barua; *Early History of Kamarupa;* p. 299.

tues of himself and his brother, Chilarai, to be engraved inside the temple. These statues are still seen inside the Kamakhya temple. An inscription recorded on a stone tablet reads thus:

"Lokanugrahakarakah karunaya prarthodhanurvidyah;
Danenapi dadhichikarnasadriso maryyadayambhonidhi,
Nanasastravicharacharucharitah kandarparupojjvalah;
Kamakhyacharanarchakovijayate Sri Malladevonripah,
Prasadamadriduhituscharamaravinda;
Bhaktya karotudanujo vara Nila saile,
Sri Sukladeva imamullasitopalena;
Sake turangagajavedasasankasamkhye,
Tasyaiva priyasodarah prithujasavirendra maulisthali;
Manikyam bhajamana kalpavitapi Nilachalemanjulam,
Prasadam muninagavedasasabhrit sake silarajibhih;
Devibhaktimatamvaro rachitavan Sri Sukla purvadhvajah."

"Glory to the King Malladeva (Naranarayan), who by virtue of his mercy, is kind to the people, who in archery is like Arjuna and in charity like Dadhichi and Karna; he is like an ocean of all goodness; and he is versed in many *sastras;* his character is excellent; in beauty he is as bright as Kandarpa, he is a worshipper of Kamakhya. His younger brother, Sukladev (Chilarai) built this temple of bright stones on the Nilachal, for the worship of the goddess Durga in 1487 Saka (1565 A.D.). His beloved brother, Sukladhvaj, again with universal fame, the crown of the greatest heroes, who, like the fabulous Kalpataru, gave all that was devoutly asked of him, the chief of all devotees of the goddess, constructed this beautiful temple with heaps of stones on the Nila hill in 1487 Saka."

It is very difficult to offer any description about the architecture of the temple. The Sikhara of this temple follows the pattern of the bee-hive which is in fact a characteristic feature of many temples in lower Assam. In the lower part of the structure of the temple is seen the sunken panels alternating with pilasters. Below them one sees the plinth mouldings of the older temple. While the plinth of the *mandapa* of the main temple has been covered by the levelling of the court-yard, the plinth mouldings of the sanctum can be seen inside a shallow pit lined with stone. Thus the three successive stages of the building on this site are clearly seen.[20]

The temple of Kamakhya is important as it gives us some of the best specimen of sculptural art in Assam. Art critics assign the sculpture of Assam to the fourth school. As Gopinath Rao observes: "Viewing broadly, it may well be said that there are four different schools representing four different regions of India. The fourth school, which resembles closely the third in respect of ornamentation and grouping, is chiefly represented by the sculpture of Bengal, Assam and Orissa. It is at once recognised by the human figures therein possessing round faces, in which are set two oblique eyes, a broad forehead, a pair of thin lips and a small chin."

The earlier carvings recovered from this temple bear some very suggestive panels. Among many other panels on the west gateway of the temple is seen a small house-holder doing his daily worship, while his wife is engaged in suckling her child. This

20. *Cf; A.R.A.S.I.*, 1924-1925.

'mother and child' portrait is not only lively and natural, but also of singular beauty.

On another frieze are observed two other carvings: one shows a woman worshipper kneeling and pouring water from a spouted vessel into the mouth of an animal, and the other represents a conch-blower in profile with an *usnisa* on the head and a conch held to his mouth, the cheeks bulging out as in the act of blowing the conch.

Of the dancing figures mention may be made of a sculpture with a male figure. It is executed with geometrical precision, gracefully portraying the curve of the body. The head is inclined towards the right shoulder, the left hand is moved round the head so as to touch the fingers of the right hand, the arm of which is stretched upwards in a straight line. In spite of the mutilated face, the figure seems remarkable for the elegance of the pose.

Among other sculptures mention may be made of the dancing Ganesha and the Chamunda. Ganesha has four arms and is dancing on his rat, which looks up to the god. The figure of the Chamunda is fearful, with protruding teeth, long tongue, erect hair, emaciated body, shrunken eyes, and withered belly. Her pedestal is carved with ghosts, riding on whose shoulders she roams over the earth. She holds a trident in one hand, and a skull or a cup in the other. Her whole aspect is terrific in the extreme and awe-inspiring.

Among other temples on the Nilachala mention may be made of Ghantakarna, Tara, Bhairavi,

Bhuvaneswari, etc. The temple of Ghantakarna is situated to the west side of the Kamakhya temple into the basement of which stone fragments of older temples have been built. One of these fragments, as described by K.N. Dikshit, "is a beautifully carved frieze in which the band represents a series of garlands and the lower scroll-work, in which some very spirited representations of animals occur. Only four animal figures of these series, viz., a buffalo, a deer, a lion and a tiger are extant, but the quality of the art manifested in them is unsurpassed in Assam".[21]

The celebrated shrine of Kamakhya wears a colourful look during annual fairs and festivals. Of the most important are the Durga Puja, the Ambuvaci fair and Debaddhani festival.

The Durga Puja, celebrated during September-October, is an autumnal festival of great importance. It goes on for three days and during this period many people visit the Kamakhya temple.

The Ambuvaci (Ameti as is known in some parts of Assam), a menstruation ritual, is celebrated once a year in the first part of the month of Asadha. Mother Earth (goddess Kamakhya) becomes 'impure' due to menses. It lasts for three days and during this period the temple doors are closed and pilgrims are not allowed inside the temple. However, on the fourth day the doors of the shrine are opened and pilgrims, gathered for the opportune occasion from different parts of Assam including West Bengal and Orissa, are allowed inside the temple.

21. *A.R.A.S.I.*, 1923-24, pp. 80-81.

The *Devi Bhagavata* puts it thus:—

"During the first quarter of the *Ardra* constellation, the Earth remains in her menses. The name of the Earth in menses is Ambuvaci,—your worship will be done on a day when that flow is stopped."

The *Devi Bhagavata* continues:—

"Oh Sankari, one should not dig the earth even by the tip of a needle. One should avoid sowing seeds for 24 *praharas* (i.e. for 72 hours). If one sows by mistake, one should allow the cattle to eat the shoots up. If one eats, one should perform a penance of *Krchhra*, and if one digs, one should perform a *tilakanchana* (i.e. make a gift of sesamum and gold), for (on that occasion) all the mother goddesses like Durga remain in menses".[22]

It is the time of the year when the Mother Earth attains her fertility to conceive the crops. The agriculturists particularly in Assam take this time of the year to sow their first seedlings of the Sali paddy, which is transplanted after a few weeks.

To symbolise the occasion only red flowers, red vermilion, etc., are used. Red colour signifies the menstrual flow. On this occasion pieces of red cloth, with the deity's menstrual blood, are given to the votaries as sacred symbols. This fair subsists even at present.

The Debaddhani festival is held in connection with the Manasa Puja. It is so called because of the tremendous sound produced by the instruments such as drum, Dhole, etc., used on the occasion.

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22. Quoted from *Fairs and Festivals of Assam*, p. 30 .

The worship of the goddess Manasa is a living and powerful cult in Assam. She is worshipped with much adoration and ceremony particularly in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and Darrang. She is also worshipped by the Kacharis. She is generally worshipped in the months of *Jaistha, Asadha, Sravana* and *Bhadra,* and also during times of pestilence and disease.

Manasa is generally identified with the sister of the serpent king Vasuki who was married to the hermit Jarut Karu and became the mother of Astika, and according to the *Mahabharata* was to save the Nagas from being exterminated by the snake-goddess. This however, seems to occupy a somewhat indefinite position in the Brahmanical pantheon. Although serpent worship was associated with Brahmanic religion from a remote time, the name of the goddess Manasa does not seem to appear in the early literature. It therefore leads one to the belief that Manasa is not a goddess with a Vedic and Puranic past, but an assimilation from outside. Professor Kshitimohan Sen suggests that Manasa obtained her semi-Sanskritised name from the South-Indian snake goddess Mancamma. On this ground, Bhattasali concludes that the cult of Manasa was imported to eastern India from the south. He, however, seems to forget the fact that snake-worship is more widely distributed and developed in more interesting forms, among the various tribes of Assam. Among the Khasis of Assam the most remarkable form of serpent-worship is that of U Thlen, a gigantic snake which demands to be appeased by the sacrifice of

human victims, and for whose sake murders have been committed, even in recent times.[23] In Manipur, which preserves the Mahabharata tradition of being the seat of the Naga king Citravahana, whose daughter Citrangada was married to Arjuna, even at the present day, the ancestral god of the royal family is a snake called Pakhangba. The Rabhas worship a serpent God which once dwelt in a cave and was propitiated by the annual sacrifice of a boy and a girl.[24]

Manasa seems to be originally a local deity worshipped by the non-Hinduised people of the province, but by and by she came to gain popularity among the upper classes of the Hindu society. In the present state of our knowledge we cannot say when actually the cult of Manasa was introduced into Assam.

According to a popular legend, which gives us an account of the spread of the Manasa cult in Eastern India, on the marriage of Hara and Gauri, they got a daughter named Padma or Manasa. Immediately after her birth, Padma was sent to the lower region to rule over and obtain worship from the serpents.

The goddess Manasa was not content with her sovereignty of the lower world. She resolved also to claim honour and worship from all sections of the people of the earth. But her greatest opponent was Chand Sadagar, the most wealthy member of

23. Gurdon: *The Khasis*, pp. 98 ff., 175 ff., *Census of India* 1901, Assam, Pt. I, p. 49.
24. *Census of India*, 1911, Assam, Pt. I, p. 145.

the merchant community of the city of Champaka, commonly identified with a place on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the modern Kamrup district of Assam. Chand Sadagar was a devout follower of Siva and he would in no circumstances worship Manasa. His wife, Soneka, one day made secret arrangements for worshipping Manasa. But when Chand Sadagar came to know of it he flew into a rage and kicked off all articles of offerings collected for her worship. At this treatment the goddess Manasa was furious and she determined to take revenge on Chand Sadagar and his family. In course of a few days she caused the death of Chand Sadagar's six sons, sank the boats of Chand Sadagar which carried rich merchandise from abroad, and made him fall into abject poverty and destitution. In spite of these misfortunes, Chand Sadagar chose to suffer rather than worship Manasa. Not to speak of the members of his family, even people of Campakanagara dreaded Chand Sadagar and did not dare to propitiate the goddess Manasa. After sometime, a seventh son was born to Chand Sadagar and Soneka and was named Lakhindara. When he grew up, Lakhindara was married to a very accomplished girl named Behula or Beula. As it was predicted by the astrologers that Lakhindara would be bitten to death by a snake on the very marriage night, his father got erected a house of iron (called *Meraghara*) without a hole in it and made the couple to live therein. In spite of all these precautions, Lakhindara was bitten to death by a snake on the bridal night. The snake was no doubt commissioned to

do this ghastly act by Manasa. Beula, however, resolved to bring her husband back to life at all risks and would not part with his body. In the next morning, she got a raft made, and set it afloat on the river with the body of her husband. The raft went on and on for many days and nights and men, animals, spirits and goblins attempted on the way to frighten and dissuade her from her resolution. Nothing could however move her and alone she drifted in the midstream till the raft stopped on the shore. Near the place where the raft stood was Neta, a washerwoman of the gods. Beula got down on the bank and collected a pile of wood to burn herself on a pyre with the skeleton of her husband. Neta saw it and prevented the woman from the act of immolation. Thereupon, Beula narrated the story of her misfortune hearing which Neta promised to take her into the presence of Siva. Beula was taken to Siva, and she propitiated the great god with dance and music. Siva was pleased and restored to life Lakhindara and his six brothers. Beula, with her husband and brothers-in-law, returned happily to Campakanagara. On her return, Beula entreated Chand Sadagar to pay offerings to Manasa. Chand Sadagar agreed to do so only with his left hand.

In Assam, the Hindus worship it under the iconographical form of Manasa or Visahari, remover of poison. In this form she is represented as a handsome female of golden colour with a snake as her *vahana,* as well as a hood of kings of serpents over her head and body clothed in snakes. However, in

that festival offerings are made to her without any image being made. The festival lasts for two or three days in which songs connected with Chand Sadagar are recited.

During this festival dances are arranged at the shrine of Kamakhya. The dancer is called 'Deodha'. The dancers live a regulated life without taking non-vegetarian food and in constant meditation of their *ista devatas*. It is believed that they see the goddess in their dreams a month prior to the festival. While they are dancing, they are not conscious of their surroundings and perform certain acts of chivalry like walking on the sharp edge of a sword without any injury to their person. Their predictions are regarded trustworthy.

As mentioned before, Manasa is also worshipped during times of pestilence and disease. She is then invoked as the goddess Marai. Buffaloes, goats, pegions are sacrificed before her. During her worship the songs are sung with proper musical instruments and dancing movements.

The temple of the goddess Kamakhya occupies a unique place in the religious life of the people. The Devi is worshipped both according to the right hand and the left hand methods. There are no restrictions to foreigners about the mode of worshipping the Devi and they may worship her according to their native rites and ceremonies. Animals, except the female ones, are slaughtered at the altars of the temple even at present.

The temple derives much of its income from its own landed property. A portion of the income

is also derived from the contributions of the devotees, although no official figure is available. The expenses connected with festivals and the general expenses as well are met from out of the temple funds.

2. ASVAKRANTA

The temple of Asvakranta, situated in North-Gauhati, is an important Vaisnava shrine. It is just opposite to Gauhati and a visitor can go there by motor boats that are available at Suklesvar Ghat (Gauhati).

Asvakranta means 'ascended by horses'. It is here that Sri Krishna camped with his army before he defeated and killed Naraka. We have already referred to the Naraka legend and how he was placed as the kings of Pragjyotisa by Visnu. At first Naraka was pious and ruled his country righteously. But soon he became friendly with Bana, king of Sonitpur, a Saivite king who had become all powerful by propitiating Siva. This friendship between the two resulted in king Naraka becoming irreligious and presumptuous. Possessed by demonic ideas (*asuram bhavamasadya*), Naraka began to harass the Brahmanas and even neglected the goddess Kamakhya, who was greatly favoured by Visnu.

To add to his misfortune, the sage Vasistha visited Kamarupa and wished to worship the goddess Kamakhya. Naraka refused permit to Vasistha to go to Kamakhya temple whereupon the sage cursed Naraka saying that he would be slain by

his father Visnu and that the goddess Kamakhya would remain hidden during the short duration of his life.

Now Naraka had completely alienated both Visnu and the goddess Kamakhya and it was at this juncture he sent for Bana for friendly guidance. Bana's study showed "that Indra was a jealous god and did not tolerate the prosperity and well-being of any one, be a man, a *raksasa*, a *kinnara*, or a *daitya*. By crooked means and with the help of other gods he was sure to encompass his downfall. Visnu was the tutelary god of Indra and Visnu would not suffer anybody to do harm to Indra. Whoever worshipped Visnu for a boon potent against Indra, would be granted one coupled with fatal defects. Though Visnu was his protector, he had no natural compassion for anybody. He was propitiated by his (Naraka's) mother and so he granted a conditional boon that all would be well with Naraka unless and until he offended the twice-born. Vasistha should not be found fault with. So Naraka should try to propitiate Brahma or Siva." Naraka was convinced by the arguments of Bana and he chose to worship Siva "because he was lying concealed in his own kingdom,—*antarguptam sa me pure.*"

But Naraka's rule became unbearable. At last Visnu in the person of Krishna came to invade Pragjyotisa. He is said to have halted his army and stabled his horses on the rock opposite to Gauhati, on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river. He killed Naraka and installed his son Bhagadatta or Bhagirath of the Muslim writers on the throne.

As Visnu redeemed the rule of Naraka and restored peace in Kamarupa, a temple was built in honour of Visnu on the site where he stabled his horses. It was called Asvakranta. A number of small holes in the rock near the Brahmaputra river are believed to be the footprints of Sri Krishna's horses.

The Asvakranta temple contains the image of Anantasayin Visnu, a reclining statue of wonderful workmanship. As laid down in the texts, a tortoise, a frog, and a piece of water-weed are shown supporting Ananta upon which Visnu is seen reclining. Of his four arms, the lower left is thrown on the body of the serpent, while the lower right is stretched along the right thigh. The four-faced Brahma is depicted as sitting on the lotus which has sprung out from the navel of Visnu. Devi or Mahamaya and the two demons, Madhu and Kaitabha, are standing on the one corner. Two rows of Nagakanyas, one on the space between the coil of the serpent, are seen kneeling down on his feet with folded hands. The scene is surrounded by an archtype *prabhamandala*, and the entire carvings appear to be sculptures of high artistic excellence.

Asvakranta is considered to be the greatest *tirtha*. According to the *Yogini Tantra*, this is a place for gift, recitation of *mantras*, *homa*, *pinda*, meditation and study. Sin as great as a mountain is worn off by a visit to Asvakranta. At the touch of a speck of dust of this place, it is believed, the most hardened sinner is able to attain salvation. The salvation that the residents of Asvakranta attain is

not to be attained even by residence at Ganga and Pushkarana. Even a slayer of a Brahmana is absolved of his sin if he practises *yoga* there; what is gained with great gifts in other *tirthas* is gained here at Asvakranta with a mere day's fast. To quote the text:—

"Sarvatirthesu vikhyatamasvakrantamatah param
Etadeva param jnanametadeva param tapah
Etadeva param brahma etadeva param padam
Yatha narayanah srestho devanam purusottamah
Yathesvaranmam girisah snananametaduttamam
Dattam japtam hutam sesam tapastaptam krtanca yat
Dhyanamadhyayanam jnanam sarvam bhavati caksayam
Asvakrante paro yogo hyasvakrante para gatih
Asvakrante paro moksastirtham naivasti tadrsam
Merumandaratulyopi rasih papasya sarvasah
Asvakratam samasadya sarva vrajati samksayam
Asvakrantasthitah sprstah pamsubhirvayunmeritaih
Yadi duskrtakarmarmano yasyanti paramam gatim
Na sa gatih kuruksetre gayadvare ca puskare
Ya gatirvihita pumsam hyasvakrantanivasinam
Na danena tapobhirna yajnairnapi ca vidyaya
Prapyate gatirukrsta casvatirthe sa labhyate

*** *** ***

Mahadanena tallabho yatphalam labhate narah
Asvatirthe tu kakinyam dattayam labhateksayam
Merumandaratulyo-hi rasih papasya sarvasah
Asvakrantam samasadya sarvo brajati samksayam"
(*Yogini Tantra;* 11/4.)

3. VASISTHASRAMA

Vasisthasrama or the hermitage of Vasistha is situated about ten miles to the east of the town of Gauhati. It is situated in beautiful natural surroundings. Here are three streams called Sandhya, Lalita and Kanta. A bath here is said to increase

to have dwelt here in the form of Bhayananda. According to the *Kalika Purana*, in the beginning of the creation Siva sprinkled here ashes (*bhasma*) and imparted knowledge to Parvati. The Puranic tradition is that when Siva was in meditation on this hillock Kamadeva interrupted his *yoga* and was therefore burnt to ashes by the fire of Siva's anger and hence the hillock got the name Bhasmacala.

Bhasmacala is also called Bhasmakuta. The *Kalika Purana* states that Urvasikunda is situated here and here dwells the goddess Urvasi who brings nectar for the enjoyment of Kamakhya and hence the island got the name Urvasi Island.

The presiding deity of the temple is Umananda (*Tatrasti bhagavan sambhuruma-nandakarah prabhuh*). Worship here on the *Amavasya* day when it falls on Monday brings the highest bliss. The *Siva-Caturdasi* is the most colourful festival that is held here every year. Many devotees gather at the temple on this occasion for the worship of the deity.

The small temple of Umananda was built in 1694 A.D. by the Bar Phukan Garhganya Handique by the order of King Gadadhar Singh (1681-1696), one of the strongest and ablest rulers of the Ahom dynasty. The original temple was however badly damaged by the great earthquake of 1897. Later, it was repaired and reconstructed by a rich local merchant who chose to inscribe the inner part of a Siva temple with Vaisnavite slogans. The temple has bequeathed some rock-cut figures which speak eloquently of the masterly skill of the Assamese

craftsmen. The sculptures also show that the worshippers there followed all the principal Hindu gods, as we find representations there of Surya, Ganesha, Siva and Devi (with a scorpion as emblem) in addition to those of Visnu and his ten incarnations.

The temple derives its income from the lands settled on the temple by the kings. The lands are placed in charge of the managers of the temple called Dalais.

5. UGRA TARA

The temple of Ugra Tara in Uzan Bazaar in the eastern part of Gauhati is an important Sakta shrine. Ugra Tara is generally identified with Tiksna-Kanta, Eka-Jata, etc., of the Buddhist pantheon. As the *Yogini Tantra* puts it: "Tara is the same as Kali, the embodiment of supreme love. So also is Kamakhya. By thinking of them as different from Kali one would go to hell." Thus the *Yogini Tantra* gives an identical origin to Tara, Kamakhya and Kali.

Ugra Tara was worshipped according to *Vamacara* rites. This was because of a curse given to her by sage Vasistha. The story goes that Yama lodged a complaint with Brahma saying that all those who lived in Kamarupa went to heaven because of the sacredness of the place and nobody went to his realm. Brahma, in turn, carried this complaint to Visnu and together they met Siva and told him about the horrid state of affairs in the land of Kamarupa.

Siva agreed to look into the matter and thereafter ordered the hosts and goddess Ugra Tara to drive away all the people of Kamarupa. In the course of this drive, they laid their hands on sage Vasistha who was meditating on Siva on the Sandhyacala. Vasistha grew furious and pronounced the following terrible curse on Ugra Tara and her associates:—

"O you woman, since you being a woman (*vama*) are expelling me also, you will henceforth be worshipped according to *vamacara* (left-handed) rites. Your hosts roving about like Mlecchas will henceforth be degraded to the rank of Mlecchas. Since Siva himself is anxious to see me off, he will henceforth receive only the worship of the Mlecchas, being always covered over with ashes and carrying bones. This land of Kamarupa will be ruled over by Mlecchas and till the advent of Visnu all the Saivite scriptures (*agamas*) will be rarities."

The curse had the immediate effect. Vedic rites were given up completely. Worship of gods and goddesses including that of Siva was conducted according to *vamacara* rites. Animals were slaughtered both at the altars of Siva and Tara temples. In fact, *Kalika Purana* gives an elaborate account of sacrifice on a large scale of animals and human beings. The sacrificial animals included "birds, tortoises, alligators, fish, nine species of wild animals, buffaloes, bulls, he-goats, ichneumons, wild boars, rhinoceros, antelopes, iguanas, reindeer, lions, tigers".[26] To this list *Yogini Tantra* adds monkeys. It was also the

26. *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, pp. 69-70.

practice to offer blood drawn from one's own body. But ordinarily females of all animals are exempted from sacrifice.[27]

The present temple of Ugra Tara was built by King Siva Singh in 1725 A.D. who had excavated a tank three years earlier. The tank is situated to the east of the temple and is known as Jorepukhuri. The tank still exists, though the upper portion of the temple was destroyed by the great earthquake. This was however rebuilt by a private citizen.

6. SUKRESVARA

Sukresvara temple is located in the town of Gauhati on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. The *Kalika Purana* calls the hillock, on which the temple is built, Hasti and describes it to be the *asrama* (hermitage) of the sage Sukra. According to the *Kalika Purana*, Sukresvara Linga was set up here.

The temple to Sukresvara was built by King Pramatta Singh of the Ahom dynasty in 1744 A.D. In this temple is worshipped one of the largest Lingas (phallic emblems) of Siva to be found in India. The temple is still intact though the roof of the Nat mandir attached to it has been replaced with corrugated iron-sheets.

7. THE NAVAGRAHA

The temple of Navagrahas is situated in the south-eastern part of the Gauhati town on the crest of a hill known as Citracala. The temple contains

27. *Op. Cit.;* p. 69.

nine phallic emblems of Siva covered with cloths of different colours sacred to the nine planetary gods, namely, *Surya* (Sun), *Candra* (Moon), *Mangala* (Mars), *Budha* (Mercury), *Brihaspati* (Jupiter), *Sukra* (Venus), *Sani* (Saturn), *Rahu* and *Ketu*. The Navagrahas or the nine planets are thus represented in the Sastras:—

"Surya's great chariot has one wheel and is drawn by seven horses, he has a lotus in each hand, wears an armour and has a shield over his breast, has beautiful straight hair, and is surrounded by a halo of light.

"Candra is represented in white colour, clothed in white garment, surrounded by a halo and adorned with ornaments and garland of all sorts of flowers.

"Mangala is represented in fire-like red colour, clothed in red garments, seated upon Simhasana, with three arms bearing Gada, Sula, Sakti weapons and as one in an Abhaya or Varada pose.

"Budha is represented in yellow colour, clothed in yellow garment, with three arms bearing Khadga, Khetaka, Gada and one in Varada pose.

"Brihaspati is represented in yellow colour, clothed in golden yellow garments with three arms bearing Kamandalu, Aksamala, Danda and one in Varada pose. Sometimes this planet is represented with two arms having a Pustaka and an Aksamala.

"Sukra is represented in white colour, clothed in white garments, having four arms and bearing the same weapons as Brihaspati. Just like him it

is sometimes represented with two hands bearing Nidhi (treasure) and Pustaka.

"Sani is represented in black colour, clothed in black garments, small in stature and somewhat lame in one leg. He has two arms bearing a Danda and an Aksamala and sometimes one in Varada pose.

"Rahu is represented on a Simhasana or a silver chariot drawn by eight horses. According to some it possesses four arms, three of which bear Khadga, Khetaka, Sula and one in Varada pose and sometimes he possesses two arms carrying a book, a woollen.

"Ketu is represented in dark colour having two arms in Abhaya pose and a Gada, and sometimes on a chariot drawn by ten horses."[28]

The present temple of Navagrahas was built during the time of King Rajesvar Singh in 1752 A.D. The upper part (*Sikhara*) of the temple was destroyed by the great earthquake and was rebuilt with corrugated iron-sheet. The *garbhagriha*, built of brick, however, exists. Regular worship is carried on by the votaries even at present.

In 1753 A.D. King Rajesvar Singh also excavated a tank at little distance from the temple of Navagrahas so that the temple goers might have an easy and perennial supply of water. The tank, known as Silpukhuri, continues to be as full of water as it was when it was first excavated and supplies water daily to the needy.

A stone inscription fixed on the walls of the temple records the construction of the same by Ta-

28. *J.H.Q.*, Vol. VI, pp. 367-368.

run Duarah, under the orders of King Rajesvar Singh. The temple was consecrated to the Navagrahas in 1674 Saka Era (1752 A.D.). K. L. Barua thinks that this temple is the origin of the name Pragjyotisapura or the City of Eastern Astrology as Assam was called in the early period.

8. HAJO

Hajo, a village in Kamrup district, is about fourteen miles to the north-west of Gauhati. It was a great centre of culture and learning. It served as the camp of the Mohammadans during their invasions of Assam and was included in the Koc kingdom. It is now one of the important centres of Community Development. There is an excellent bus service to Hajo from Gauhati. There are no good hotels or rest-house at Hajo and therefore the visitor has to halt at Gauhati itself.

There are two temples at Hajo, the Hayagriva Madhava temple and the Kedaresvara temple, of which the temple of Hayagriva Madhava figures more prominently in the religious history of Assam. The existence of this temple attests to the prevalence of Vaisnavism in Kamarupa.

Vaisnavism prevailed in Kamarupa at a time when the Brahmanical culture made considerable progress in the country and as evidence shows, the worship of both Visnu and his incarnations (*avataras*), was prevalent in the land from early times. In the Santiparva section of the *Mahabharata* Visnu is called Pragjyotisa Jyestha. *Harsacarita* of Bana describes Bhaskaravarman (7th century A.D.) as

belonging to Vaisnava family (*vaisnava vamsa*). Yuan Chwang, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, also states that Bhaskaravarman descended from Narayanadeva. However, Vaisnavism occupied only a subordinate position in the subsequent centuries and was revived again in the 13th century. Vaisnavism became the popular religion of the land in the 15th century when Sankaradeva, the founder of the neo-Vaisnavism began preaching his Bhakti Cult.

The worship of the incarnation is a significant feature of Vaisnavism and this was introduced into Assam in about the 4th century A.D. The most celebrated incarnation in the Vaisnava cult of the province is Krishna. In fact the Krishna legend formed an essential element of Vaisnavism in Kamarupa.

Hayagriva (Visnu with horse head) is the name of one of the incarnations of Visnu. Under this name, he is specially worshipped in Assam even today in the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo. It is built on a hill called Manikuta.

As regards the origin of this *avatara* (incarnation) the Santiparva section of the *Mahabharata* relates that at one time, while Visnu was sleeping and Brahma was on the lotus, issued out of the navel of Visnu, two demons Madhu and Kaitabha, who took away the Vedas from Brahma and went to Rasatala. Brahma, being much aggrieved at this, awoke Visnu, and prayed for the recovery of the Vedas. Visnu assumed the Hayagriva form and recovered the Vedas and gave them to Brahma. He then went to sleep in the north-east corner of the great sea in

his Hayagriva form. The demons came to him and invited him to fight, in which they were killed. According to other accounts, it was the Asura Hayagriva who stole away the Vedas, which were subsequently recovered by Visnu. According to *Matsya Purana* (Chapter 53) the Hayagriva *avatara* of Visnu preceded Matsya; when the worlds were burnt down, Visnu in the form of a horse re-compiled the four *Vedas, Vedangas,* etc. The *Devi Bhagavata* and the *Skanda Purana* in its *Dharmaranya-Khanda,* however, allude to two different accounts on the origin of the Hayagriva form of Visnu.

The *Kalika Purana* records that Visnu in the form of Hayagriva killed the Fever-Demon (Jvarasura) in the Manikuta hill and lived there for the benefit of men, gods and *asuras.* Afflicted with fever and killing the Fever-Demon, Visnu took an *agada* or recovery bath. It is called Apunarbhava because whosoever bathes here suffers no second birth. The *Kalika Purana* says:—

Na punarjayate yasamattatra snatva narottamah
Apunarbhava samjnam tat sarastu parikirttitam
Kalika Purana, Chapter 77

The *Yogini Tantra* gives a beautiful description of the sacred city Apunarbhava which has been identified with modern Hajo. To quote the text:—

Nilai raktaistatha subhraih prasadairupasobhitam
raksitam sastrasamghaisca parikhabhiralamkrtam
sitai raktaistatha pitaih krsnaiscanyaisca varnakaih
dhumraih samiranairdhumaih patakaisca svalamkrtam
Nityotsavapramuditam nanavaditranihsvanam
vinavenumrdangaisca ksepanibhiralamkrtam

devatayatanairdivyaih prakrstodyanamanditaih
pujavaicityaracitaih sarvatah samalamkrtam...
nanajalasayaihscanyaih padminisatamanditaih
sarovarairmanojnaisca prasannasalilaistatha
kumudaih pundarikaisca tatha nilotpalaih subhaih
kadambaiscakravakaisca tathaiva jalakukkutaih
karandavotkarairhamsaistathaiva sthalacaribhih
evam nanavidhai vrksaih punyairnanavidhai ravaih
nanajalasayaiscanyaih sobhitam tatsamantatah
(*Yogini Tantra*, II. 9.22-25, 28-31.)

As a free rendering has it, the city of Apunarbhava was beautified with blue, red and white palaces, defended by weapons and surrounded by moats. Day and night there was the uproar of festivities. It was full of temples, parks and lakes. Various kinds of lotuses were in the lakes where were seen swans sporting. The women of the city were very handsome with large eyes; their necks were adorned with diverse ornaments. Their glow and the music of their anklets ever charmed the mind of the populace. Here dwelt Janardana Hayagriva. It is a place where one can get rid of rebirths even if he enjoys all the denied things.

There is another reference to the killing of a demon named Hayagriva near about Visvanatha; The Lord of the world *(Jagatpita)* is said to have fought with Hayagriva and after having killed him migrated to Manikuta. However, it is not clear whether the Lord of the world refers to Visnu or Siva. The context appears to point to Siva as the killer of Hayagriva.[29] The *Harivamsa* (the *Visnu Parva*, Ch. 64) records that Sri Krishna after having kill-

29. B. Kakati, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 71-72.

ed Naraka, Nisunda and Hayagriva went to Maniparvata where Naraka kept confined the daughters of the Gandharvas and Asura chiefs.

The *Yogini Tantra* gives an account of the origin of the Visnu image in the Manikuta. King Indradyumna of Orissa dreamt a dream at night that a big nameless tree would come floating by the seashore. He was to take an axe and cut it into seven pieces in the morning. He did so and of the seven pieces, two were brought over to Kamarupa. With one piece the Hayagriva image was made and the other the Fish-god named Madhava.

The Manikuta is considered holy by the Buddhists of Tibet and even now Buddhists of the neighbouring Bhutan hills come down in cold season and do worship the god whom they regard as Mahamuni Buddha. Waddell mentions in his work *Lamaism* that there is a tradition in Tibet that Buddha had his *parinirvana* in Kamarupa. But the *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* make several references to Manikuta. The *Kalika Purana* says:—

Etatte kathitam punyam manikutahvayam param/
Varanasito hyadhikam siddhavidyadhara sritam//
(Chapter, 78.)

The original temple of Hayagriva-Madhava was destroyed by the Kalapahar, who also destroyed the temple of Kamakhya. The present temple, according to an inscription in the temple itself, was rebuilt by King Raghudeva Narayana, son of Sukladhwaj, in Saka 1505 (1583 A.D.). When it was completed, it was consecrated by the sacrifice of

numerous human victims. The king also endowed the temple with grants of land. The translation of the inscription reads:—

"There was a ruler on earth named Bisva Singh; his illustrious son, the most wise king Malla Deb, was the conqueror of all enemies. In gravity and liberality and for heroism he had a great reputation, and he was purified by religious deeds. After him was born his brother Sukladhwaj, who subdued many countries. The son of this Sukladhwaj was King Raghudeb, who was like the greatest man of the Raghu race: his glories spread out in all directions; the Lord of Kamarupa, in obedience to the order of the destiny, is the slayer of the wicked, who was like water to the flames of the fire of sorrow of the vast populace. Of the seed of Sukladhwaj, a king was born of the name of Raghudeb, who consoles innumerable persons and is a worshipper of the feet of Krishna; the king coming of age has a temple built on the hillock called Mani hillock in 1505 Saka (1583 A.D.). The most skilled and efficient artisan Sridhar himself built it."[30]

The Hayagriva temple at Hajo is one of the existing pre-Ahom temples in Assam. As regards the principal image of this temple there is no unanimous opinion. The Hindus regard it as a statue of the Man-Lion incarnation of Visnu. The Buddhists coming from Bhutan and Tibet regard the image as Mahamuni or Buddha. As Col. T. E. Dalton observed:—

30. Quoted from Gait's *History of Assam*, (3rd Edition) p. 64.

"The Brahmanas call the object of worship Madhob, the Buddhists call it Mahamuni, the great sage. It is in fact simply a colossal image of Budh in stone, and perhaps, of all the idols now occupying the holiest places in temples, the only aboriginal one.

"Its modern votaries have, to conceal mutilation, given it a pair of silver goggle-eyes, and a hooked, gilt or silvered nose, and the form is concealed from view by cloths and chaplets of flowers: but remove these and there is no doubt of the image having been intended for the "ruler of all, the propitious, the asylum of clemency, the all-wise, the lotus-eyed, the comprehensive Buddha."[31] But some hold the view that 'at least from the sixteenth century, the temple has been considered to be one dedicated to Hayagriva Madhava....."[32]

The principle of general lay-out of the temple and its adjuncts is quite in keeping with other temples met elsewhere in Kamarupa. The temple, as mentioned before, is built on a small hillock and a flight of stone steps composed of slabs leads to the main precincts of the temple.

The temple is built in stone, octagonal in plan, about thirty feet in diameter and crowned with a pyramidal roof. It appears "from the disarrangement of many of the mouldings and cornices, and awkward position of several bas-reliefs, that the upper portion of the temple has been reconstructed

31. *Notes on Assam Temple Ruins; J. A. S. B.*, 1855, lxxi, p. 19.
32. *J.A.R.S.*, Vol. II, No. 4, pp. 92-93.

from the old materials, without much precision of arrangement."[33]

In its vertical elevation, the temple consists of three parts, the high basement, the middle portion of the temple and the Sikhara. As in many other temples, a row of elephants, *gajathara*, appears as a basement moulding. On a moulding of about two feet above the plinth, a row of caparisoned elephants in high relief encircles the building and appears to bear the full brunt of the edifice. The elephants, all tuskers, are facing outwards, and standing each 16" in height, and are finely designed and executed showing only their tusks, trunks and front legs. The basement moulding is identical with the decorative style of the Kailasa cave temple at Ellora.

The *garbhagriha* "is a crypt, 14 feet square, into which you descend by a flight of stone steps. It contains the image and its pedestal. The door case to this shrine, is formed of four blocks of granite, and is ten feet high by five feet wide: a lotus over the door in the entrance of the lintel, is the only ornament. The door opens into an anteroom, also of stone, ten feet by ten feet, having niches of four feet square, stone screens, one on each side with apertures for the admission of light and air, cut in form of lotus flowers."[34]

The Sikhara of this imposing Hayagriva temple has a pyramidal plane face which continues right upto an apex point.

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33. Col. Dalton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 19.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

of the present town. Professor R. D. Banerji who explored the region gives the following description about the ruins:

"Close to the modern civil station of Tezpur is a small village of Dah Parbatiya which possesses the unique distinction of having within its limits the ruins of the oldest temple in Assam. The ruins consist of the remains of a brick temple of Siva, of the Ahom period, erected upon the ruins of a stone temple of the later Gupta period, *Circa* sixth century A.D. The former collapsed, during the earthquake of 1897, revealing the door-frame of the older structure", which, according to him belongs to the Pataliputra school.[1] He has assigned this door-frame to the Gupta period because of its use of:

(1) trefoil medallions in *Caitya* windows on the lintel,
(2) the use of the figures of river goddesses on the lower parts of the jambs,
(3) the false recessed angles of the lintel,
(4) the flying figure in high relief in the centre of the lower part of the lintel, and
(5) the particularly expressive figures of *ganas* on the arms of the cruciform bracket capitals of the pilasters.

This beautiful lintel is one of the best specimens of its class of the Gupta period. The carving on the jambs is continued overhead in four out of the five bands. The lower part of the jambs consists

1. *The Age of the Imperial Guptas*, pp. 194-196; cf. *A.R.A.S.I.*, 1922-23, pp.119-20; 1924-25, pp. 98-99.

of single panels, in very high relief against which are the figures of the river goddesses with female attendants on each side. The river goddesses exceed the limits of the panel but the attendant figurines have been kept very well within bounds. There are three attendants in the case of Ganga on the right, but two only in that of Yamuna to the left. Behind the back of each figure appear two flying geese pecking at the halo of the goddess, a new feature in the Gupta art. There are five bands of ornament on each jamb:—

(1) A meandering creeper rising above the head of a Naga.

(2) The body of the Naga and the Nagi rising from the top of the square panel at the bottom of each jamb and continued between the first and the second bands of the lintel. The tails of these two serpents are held by the figures of Garuda in high relief against the lower part of the lintel, and

(3) Ornamental foliage consisting of a straight stem with *amorini* clinging to it. These three bands are continued overhead on the lintel as its lowermost bands of ornaments.

(4) A pilaster, square in section bearing on it square bosses covered with arabesque as projections, which acts as supports to a number of human or divine figures and ends in a cruciform bracket capital.

(5) A double intertwined creeper forming conventional rosettes which is continued on the side projection of the lintel.

In its horizontal aspect, the temple, in addition to the *garbhagriha* and the anteroom just described, has a large vestibule measuring 40 feet by 20 feet built of brick and resting on massive brick pillars. This is a new addition to the original structure, perhaps constructed by Naranarayan, the Koc king in 1550 A.D.[35]

The upper walls of the exterior of the temple contain life-size sculptured figures. Here are represented the ten *avataras* with Buddha as the ninth. The rest of the figures are of a non-descript character, but they are mostly male, and nearly all figures carry a trident *(Trisula)*. According to the Lamas, these figures were originally inside the temple, but were ejected by the Buddha.[36]

The temple derives its revenue from the land endowed on it by the kings. Artisans and others are supported out of the temple funds.

The chief priest of the temple is called Dalai. He is elected from among the local priests and holds office till his death. He resides in a large house situated at the foot of the hill, just below the temple.

The temples of the Kamrup district could be conveniently seen by camping at Gauhati which has all the tourist facilities.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
36. *J.A.R.S.*, Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 42-43.

CHAPTER III

1. DAH PARBATIYA TEMPLE AT TEZPUR

Tezpur is the headquarters of the Darrang district of Assam. It is a railway station on the North-East Frontier Railway and is about 150 kilometres from the Rangiya railway junction on the main line. It is a fine town and is widely known in India and outside in recent years. It may be noted here that it was the first major town of India to receive Dalai Lama when he came to India after the Tibetan Uprising. Tezpur has all facilities for tourists such as hotels, Dak bungalows, etc.

In pre-historic times Tezpur was known by the name Sonithpur or "the city of blood". It was the capital of Banasura, a great friend of Naraka, the Danava king of Pragjyotisha. At that time the whole of the present Darrang district and the North Lakhimpur subdivision were included in the kingdom of Bana. Bana was a great devotee of Siva and is said to have constructed the Mahabhairava temple. Bana had many sons and one daughter named Usha who was secretly married by Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna. Aniruddha was then captured, but was subsequently released by Krishna, who defeated Bana in a great battle fought on the site of what is now known as the Tezpur *bil*.

Even in historical times that Tezpur was the centre of cultural activity is seen by the ruins of a temple discovered at Dah Parbatiya to the west

whole composition seems to be natural, full of action, and lively, and is represented with considerable success.

The temple walls were generally decorated with sculptures depicting various scenes from the Epics and the social and domestic life led by the people of the period. We have already noticed a frieze from the ruins of this temple which illustrates the *Mahabharata* story of Pandu. Another frieze from the same ruins, having five panels, shows Rama and Lakshmana seated, the latter behind the former, while Sugriva is kneeling before Rama in supplication, and Hanuman and another monkey are watching the scene with reverence. The scene portrayed evidently relates to the incident from the *Ramayana*, in which Hanuman succeeded in securing the friendship of Rama for the protection of Sugriva. Another frieze found in the same place represents the well known scene from the *Mahabharata*, namely, the *Garuda-garvabhanga*, or the extermination of Garuda's pride.[7]

Another frieze belonging to the 10th century A.D., and consisting of three panels, illustrates (i) a woman in her toilet, (ii) a man dragging a fallen woman from a scene where another is about to thrash her, while a second woman is dissuading him, and (iii) a man advancing with a raised mace.[8] A second frieze from the same place, which is divided into four panels, contains the following scenes from left to right: (a) an ascetic pushing a goat

7. *A. R. A. S. I.*, 1936-37, Plate XIX (a).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

before him, (b) another ascetic dancing with *sula* and *dhakka* in his hands and *kamandalu* hanging from his right arm, and (c) a seated woman in an ecstatic mood. Yet another frieze divided into two big panels illustrates a combat between two warriors. The actual combat is shown in one panel, while in the other, one of the warriors marches off in triumph with the severed head of the other held in his hands, the headless trunk staggering behind.[9]

These sculptures give us some glimpse of the contemporary life of the people. But the diversities of scenes of these sculptural depictions are so numerous that we have only pointed out a few leading varieties.

Of the sculptural designs, we may mention the *caitya*-windows of two different types on a lintel. One of these patterns is a trefoil in which all the three arcs are of the same size, in the other the upper arc is larger than the two arcs on the sides.[10] The interior of the sunken panel is entirely covered with geometrical patterns with a half rosette in the centre.

In the delineation of vegetable life the artist was in the height of his form. Combined with a considerable amount of faithful representation and integrity there is an amount of luxuriance of decoration and of picturesque arrangement. As floral ornamentation could be employed for any decorative purpose and any vacant space could be filled

9. *A.R.A.S.I.*, 1936-37. Plate XX.
10. *The Age of the Imperial Guptas*, p. 196; A.R.A.S.I., 1924-25, p. 97.

up with such devices, naturally they became varied in form and numerous in number. Of the floral designs, the lotus was by far the greatest favourite, and it was carved in various forms, in bud, in a half-open state, and in full blown flowers. In Deo Parbat there is a beautiful representation of a cluster of lotuses in full bloom and appears to be issuing from a pond. Another illustration from the same place exhibits a row of busts with hands holding lotuses; their *patra-kundalas* were also designed like full-blown lotuses.

Among the images of Gods mention may first be made of a four-armed Siva as Tripurari and in dancing pose, now in Assam Provincial Museum. The image, in its two main hands holds bow and arrow. A tiara is seen on the head while circular *patra-kundalas* adore the ears.

An interesting figure of Siva as Lakulisa is found carved on a *caitya*-window in the ruins of Dah Parbatiya. Lakulisa is usually represented as seated on *padmasana,* with penis erect and a *matulinga* (citron fruit) in the right hand and a staff in the left. Our Lakulisa is a seated figure with a rope tied round his leg. A female is holding a cup to his left while another stands to his right.

We have given above an exhaustive account of the ruins of the Dah Parbatiya Siva temple, the oldest and the finest piece of architectural work in Assam. It points to the fact that both architectural and sculptural skill of the Assamese craftsmen had reached its height during the period under review. In the present state of our knowledge we are not

in a position to say definitely about the mode of worship at the temple, as the temple is found only in ruins.

2. OTHER REMAINS

The other temple remains that exist in or near Tezpur are undoubtedly 'extensive and varied in character.' Some of these remains came to light by chance excavation. At the time of the construction of a Deputy Commissioner's office in Tezpur in the year 1906 the remains of an ancient building of great artistic merit were discovered. These remains were removed, in the first instance, to the compounds of European officers and the Tea-planters Club from where they were finally shifted to and arranged at the Cole Park. Prof. R. D. Banerji who visited the park gives the following description about the artistic merit of these remains:—

"On examination of the remains in the park at Tezpur and those preserved in the Planters' Association or Club at the same place I find that the carvings belong to three different periods of history and therefore must have belonged, at least to three separate buildings. The most remarkable sculptures of the first group are two shafts of pillars at the entrance to the Planters' Club and heavy lintel of a stone door-frame now lying in the public park. The shaft of one of these pillars is sixteen sided, the upper end being ornamented with a broad band having *kirtimukhas* at the top and the lower with dentils. Over this band the shaft is round and appears to be lathe-turned like the upper parts of the

Western Chalukyan columns of the Bombay Presidency. In the second pillar the upper part of the shaft is dodecagonal and near the top is divided into three raised horizontal bands two of which contain *kirtimukhas* and third a series of diamond shaped rosettes. In style, both of them belong to the same period and appear to have come from one and the same building. The lintel of the stone door-frame in the public park also belongs to the same period and most probably to the same building. It is divided into two different parts. The upper part represents five miniature temples with phallic emblems of Siva in each of them. In the lower part we see a continuation of the ornamentation on the jambs, viz., two vertical bands containing meandering creepers and two others consisting entirely of rosettes which turn an angle and are continued on the soffit of the lintel. In the centre of the lower part of the lintel is a small niche containing a miniature of Ganesha. It appears from the nature of the carvings that the temple to which these three architectural specimens belong was erected late in the tenth century A.D. The length of the lintel is 6′ 10″ and the breadth 1′ 5½″.

"The second group of sculptures at Tezpur consists of specimens from a massive temple on the ruins of which the office of the Deputy Commissioner has been built. On each side of the entrance of the Planters' Club at Tezpur lie the door-sill and the lintel of the principal entrance to the enormous temple. The size of the lintel enables us to determine the size of the door-frame and consequently

of the principal entrance to the sanctum. The enormous lintel is 10' 3" in length and 1' 8" in breadth. There are three raised panels on it, one in the centre and one on each side and each of them is divided into a large niche in the centre with a smaller one on either side. The panel on the left contains a standing figure of Brahma in the central niche with an attendant on each side. The central panel is occupied by a figure of Surya with two attendants while the panel on the extreme right contains a standing figure of Siva with an attendant in each of the side niches. The space between these raised panels is divided into six niches, three to the left of the central panel and three to the right. They contain six divine figures which cannot be identified. All the niches are separated from each other by a round pilaster 2' in height, the height of the lintel itself being 2' 7½". According to the general practice in Hindu temples, the niche or panel of the lintel of the stone door-frame of the sanctum is generally occupied by the presiding deity of the temple. It appears certain, therefore that this gigantic temple was dedicated to Surya or the Sun-god. The sill of this door-frame is also of gigantic dimensions and shows a vase in the centre flanked by two lions *satatant*. Each end is occupied by a niche containing a male and a female and flanked by a smaller and narrower niche on a recessed corner, containing a single human figure. It is a pity that the jambs of this enormous door-frame have not been discovered as yet. The large jamb

in the public park appears to belong to a much later period. It is impossible therefore to deduce the height of the door-frame correctly, but it is obvious from the length of the lintel and the sill that the height of this door-frame could not have been less than 15'. If the height of the stone door-frame of the main entrance to the sanctum was 15' then the height of the interior of the chamber must have been 20'-25', leaving us to imagine the total height of the spire or *sikhara* of the original temple, which must have been considerably over 100'. The majority of the carved stones in the public park at Tezpur are taken from the plinth mouldings and string-courses of the gigantic temple, the door-frames of which have been described above. The string-courses were ornamented with *kirtimukhas* of various shapes and sizes and sunken panels containing ornamental rosettes and meandering creepers. Some of them are evidently portions of enormous capitals which were held together by metal clamps or dowels. In the centre of some of these pieces there is a projecting niche flanked by round pilasters containing divine figures. In one of these niches we find a fat female squatting on the ground, holding a piece of cloth over her head, while a female stands to her left with her hand clasped in adoration. The second specimen of the same type contains the figure of a goddess holding a lyre in her hands, evidently Sarasvati, the goddess of learning. A third specimen contains the well-known group of *Kamalatmika* or *Gajalakshmi*, more commonly known in

public park at Tezpur which appear to belong to another temple of some later date. One of these is a high door-jamb and a second a slab bearing three sunken panels occupied by very crude human or divine figures. The entire collection contains only a single specimen carved in the round, a lion, presumably on an elephant. The conventional representation of the lion shows that the inhabitants of the Assam valley were not familiar with the king of beasts."[11]

We need not be apologetic for giving this long quotation. Prof. R. D. Banerji's description of the remains brings in full measure the artistic talents of the Assamese craftsmen which can be easily compared with those of craftsmen of Central and Eastern India. It also gives an idea of aesthetic achievement which the people of Assam attained during this period. The stone sculptures and rock carvings that have been discovered here not only indicate the geographical limit of the circulation of art specimens and the spread of Hindu culture into the remotest corner of the province, but also fully reveal how closely Assam followed the general art tradition and *motifs* of Northern India.

11. *A.R.A.S.I.*, 1924-25, pp. 100 to 102.

CHAPTER IV

TEMPLES IN SIBSAGAR DISTRICT

Sibsagar, one of the modern districts of Assam, came into prominence under the Ahom rulers. The Ahoms, a group of the Shan invaders, under the hegemony of Sukhapha, first conquered the eastern portion of the country and later on, his descendants ruled the entire country for nearly six hundred years. It is an undeniable fact that the Ahom rule gave Assam for several centuries a good and strong government which, resisting successively several Muhammadan invasions, kept the country in peace, prosperity and order. The Ahoms liquidated all petty principalities, both within Assam and on the tribal frontier; and this led to the emergence of one closely knit geographical unit named Assam. The most notable achievement of the Ahom rule was this political unification of the country which in course of years led to social, cultural and linguistic unity. It also awakened the spirit of oneness among the Assamese people.

The Ahom kings were great builders. They set apart a good portion of revenue of the State for the construction of the temples and tanks. Most of these buildings that stand to this day, though in a ruined state, speak greatly of the artistic taste of the Ahom monarchs.

1. THE NEGRITING TEMPLE

The temple of Negriting or Negheriting is situated in the Sibsagar district near the Assam Trunk Road, some seventeen miles from Jorhat and about fourteen miles from Golaghat. There is no regular bus service to the place and one has to reach the place from Golaghat by taxi. The temple is dedicated to Siva.

Built on a small hillock, the temple is surrounded by tea gardens in the front as well as to the left, and wide open country to the right extending to the Brahmaputra river.

The origin of this temple is traced to one Rishi (sage) by name Aurvya Muni. In the Puranic age, we are told, there was a stone temple on the same site of the present temple, the presiding deity of which was worshipped by the sage. The sage struck upon the idea of making this place a second Kasi and collected for this purpose a good number of Siva Lingas which are now said to be all buried in a tract of low land called in these days the 'Sital Pathar'. Sital is a corrupted form of the word Sivatal.[1]

The deity of the temple was discovered during the reign of Pratap Singh (17th century) who built a temple to enshrine the deity. In the 18th century, the flood waters of the Brahmaputra river caused great damage to the temple. Therefore, King Rajesvar Singh (1751-1769 A.D.) built the present temple on the top of a hill.

1. *J.A.R S.*, Vol. VIII, No. I.; p. 10.

The Ahom sovereigns called the presiding deity 'Bar Bopai' (the Great Father) and paid great reverence to the deity. We are told that the King used to take his meal only after receiving the *nirmalya* of the daily puja at this temple. Arrangements had been made for carrying the *nirmalya* daily to the King through a special carrier appointed for the purpose.

The Siva temple at Negriting is a very attractive shrine. Built on a grand scale, the temple in its vertical elevation consists of the basement, the *garbhagriha*, and the curvilinear Sikhara with trident at the top. The *garbhagriha,* a modest structure, contains a large Bana-Linga, which is embedded in the centre of a large flat stone *(vedi)*, on which are carved a number of Siva Lingas. The middle portion of the temple outside contains a number of niches to house some graceful and exquisitely beautiful sculptures.

The main temple is surrounded on all the four sides by subsidiary shrines dedicated to Ganesha, Surya, Durga and Visnu. Every shrine has a separate portico attached to it. The smaller or subsidiary shrines resemble the main shrine in all the architectural details.

The temple has two classes of Thakurs, the Barthakurs and the Patrathakurs. Normally, the Barthakurs worship the deity, but at times of *asauch* when they are rendered unclean for religious purposes, the Patrathakur worships the deity.

The temple at one time possessed a vast landed property and engaged in its service a large number

of Brahmanas, Sudras, musicians, female dancers, potters, etc. But the Burmese invasion in the 19th century upset everything and what remains at present is no more than a few acres of land.[2]

2. THE SIB DOL

From the point of artistic merit, the Sib Dol occupies an important place in the artistic history of Assam. Situated on the bank of the Sibsagar tank, the Sib Dol occupies an area of four and a half acres. The temple belongs to the *dvaikuta* class, consisting of two cells, a *garbhagriha* and a *mandapa*. Over the *garbhagriha* rises the Sikhara with fluted vertical lines. The main Sikhara is surrounded by its replicas called *Uramanjari*.

There are two more temples on the bank of the same tank. They are the Visnu temple with a height of forty cubits and occupying an area of three acres and the Devi temple also with a height of forty cubits and occupying an area of about two and a half acres.

3. THE DEVI DOL

The Devi Dol or the Devi temple is situated at Gaurisagar, about two and a half miles from Sibsagar. The place can be reached by bus from Sibsagar.

The Devi Dol seems to resemble the Sib Dol at Sibsagar in respect of style. In this temple the Sikhara is without the familiar *amalaka* in the standard pattern; instead, a tier of gold-plated

2. *J.A.R.S.*; Vol. VIII., No. I; pp. 12-13.

kalasas in tapering sizes is placed on a solid circular base made of bricks. On the exterior walls of the temple there are bands of sculptural panels. Each panel contains a number of niches and each niche contains an image. The space in between the two panels is utilised for ornamental decoration.

The temples of this region could be seen by staying at Sibsagar where we have the necessary facilities.

CHAPTER V

TAMRESVARI TEMPLE AT SADIYA

Sadiya is an important place in the North Lakimpur district of Assam. It was originally included in the North Eastern Frontier Agency and was later transferred to Assam. It now forms the Inner Line of NEFA regulations.

Sadiya was the capital of the Chutiyas, a Mongolian tribe, who were reigning there at the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D. There are numerous legends connected with the origin of the Chutiyas and how the capital came to be called Sadiya. The following account makes an interesting reading.

The Chutiya dynasty claimed descent from Bhismak, the father of Rukmini, consort of Sri Krishna. One Birapal, a descendant of the Bhismak line was ruling at Sonagiri. He had no children and therefore his queen Rupavati offered penances to Kubera, the God of Wealth, to bless them with a child. Kubera appeared in the form of her husband and had coition with her. Then she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. He was named Gaurinarayan.

When he came of age, he succeeded his father in 1244 A.D. and assumed the name Ratnadhvajapala. He was a great conqueror and his supremacy

was acknowledged by the Chutiyas living in hills and the Raja of Kamata. He then turned his arms towards the kingdom of Gaur and sent emissaries to the king demanding the tokens of his friendship. The king of Gaur accepted his friendly proposal and agreed to forward to Ratnadhvaj pots of Ganga water in exchange for regular supply of water from Parasuramakunda. A son of Ratnadhvaj was also kept with Gaur Raja for study. Unfortunately, the prince died in Bengal and being ignorant of the funeral customs of the Chutiyas, sent the corpse to Ratnadhvaj. Ratnadhvaj was then building a palace at Sindhuksetra. As the corpse was received by him there the city was named Sa-diya (place where the corpse was given).

The religious practices of the Chutiyas were 'ghastly' in character. They worshipped different forms of Kali with the help of their tribal priests called Deoris. A dreadful conception of Kali came to be developed during this period. In this form, she was worshipped by the Chutiyas and was popularly known as Kesai Khati (eater of the raw flesh) because of the annual sacrifice at her temple. Her temple was at Sadiya and she was called Tamresvari Devi (the goddess of the copper temple). Dr. Kakati considers that she is the same goddess as Dikkaravasini whom the *Kalika Purana* describes as the presiding deity of north-eastern Assam. The goddess Dikkaravasini has two forms Tiksna-Kanta (dreadfully attractive) and Lalita-Kanta (gracefully attractive). Tiksna Kanta is black, pot-bellied and with one lock of matted hair (*Eka-jata*).

She is also called Ugratara. Her attendants are Bhaga, Subhaga, Camunda, Karala, Bhisana, Vikala—all dreadful names. She is to be worshipped in general like goddess Kamakhya, but her most delectable offerings consisted of strong spirituous liquor, human sacrifice, *modaka,* flesh, curry, cocoanuts and sugarcane.

These sacrifices were offered both on regular occasions and also to avert calamities, such as cholera, small pox, etc. But the human sacrifice at the Tamresvari temple was an annual feature. Generally, the criminals who were sentenced to capital punishments were given for the purpose. But "when none such were available, a particular clan was expected to produce a victim and in return certain privileges were granted to it. When a woman of this clan became pregnant, the astrologers were called on to ascertain the sex of the child. If they predicted that it would be a boy, the mother was carefully tended, and the child was anointed, as soon as it was born, with a paste made of turmeric and a kind of pulse. When necessity arose, a volunteer was called for, and (it is said) was usually forthcoming; if not a victim was taken by force. For sometime he was kept at the temple and fed sumptuously, until he was in sufficiently plump condition to suit the supposed taste of the goddess. He was then shaved, anointed with the same paste as at birth and adorned with gold and silver ornaments and was conducted before the image of the goddess. Here he prostrated himself and was promptly decapitated by the *bar deori,* or high

priest. The head was added to a heap of skulls that were piled in view of the shrine."[1]

For further details of this human sacrifice we have to turn to *Tikha Kalpa*, a manuscript work found in the Manipur State Library, an extract of which was published in B.B. Brown's 'An Outline Grammar of the Deori Chutiya Language':

"Human sacrifices are made, after the royal consent has been obtained, on the occasion of public calamities such as war or for the purpose of obtaining great wealth....A Brahman or a woman should never be sacrificed. Neither should one sacrifice one's own body, as then he will be guilty of the sin of suicide. A brother, a father, a son, a wife's brother, a sister's son, a maternal uncle, none of these should be sacrificed; nor anyone who is acquainted with the Vedas, or has renounced the world, or is a student, or belongs to the royal family. An enemy, a sick person, a eunuch, one who is infirm or has defects or scars should not be offered. The victim should be bathed, and properly decorated, and then brought before the goddess. The person offering the sacrifice should turn his face towards the north, and the victim should face the east. Water should be sprinkled on the victim, and the following mantra uttered: "O Goddess, living on the golden mountain, I offer this sacrifice to thee! He is good and stout and without blemish, I bind him to a post! I offer this sacrifice to remove my misfortune. O Goddess, accept him! Although I kill him, I give him salvation."[2]

1. *E.R E.*, p. 851.

2. *E.R.E.*, p. 850.

The Tamresvari temple commanded respect from a majority of people and counted amongst its votaries all the hill tribes in the vicinity, Ahoms and the Hindus of Assam. Instances are not wanting to show that this sacred shrine was frequently visited by pilgrims from regions far more remote including Tibet and China, who brought offerings to the great goddess.

The temple of Tamresvari is one of the oldest and the most important temples of this region. It now stands in a ruined state in the over-grown jungle about seven miles from Sadiya. The temple is described "as a small stone building, nearly square, but without cement, the stone joined by iron pins not clamped. The roof was of copper, but it has fallen in.....The interior is eight feet square. The whole is enclosed within a brick wall, 130 feet by 200 feet."[3]

The walls of the temple were decorated with sculptural representation which included human figures, animals, birds, flowers, geometrical designs, etc. There was also the representation of *mithuna* (erotic) sculptures.

The temple of Tamresvari which was once the flourishing centre of Tantric religion is now seen only in ruins. It is not easy to reach the spot where we can see the remains of the temple without the aid of the people of the locality who are conversant with the place. We do not hear of human sacrifices made at the altars of the temple and this practice has been given up.

3. W. B. Brown, *Op. Cit.*, Appendix, pp. 75-84.

CHAPTER VI

REMAINS OF OTHER IMPORTANT TEMPLES

1. SRI SURYA RUINS

Sri Surya Pahar is situated at a distance of some seven miles by the Dobapara road from the town of Goalpara, the headquarters of the modern district of Assam. Of all the ruins in the Goalpara district, the ruins of the Sri Surya Pahar hills occupies a significant place both in the religious and the artistic history of Assam. Rightly called 'a picture gallery of the archaeological remains' here one comes across sculptural representations belonging to the three sects of Hindus, Saivism, Vaisnavism and Saktism. At the foot of the hill and covering the extensive area are found a good number of Siva Lingas cut out of granite stone. As a local tradition has it, there were about 99,999 lingas and these were established with a view to make this town a second Kasi.

In addition to Siva Lingas, the Sri Surya Pahar remains include many rock-cut figures of artistic merit. Of the many images mention may be made of Durga, Siva and Manasa. The image of Manasa goddess, also identified as Durga by some, is a twelve armed deity cut out of a single rock. She holds weapons of different kinds in each of her

hands. She is standing on a lotus with seven snakes spreading their hoods like a canopy over her head.[1] This is perhaps 'the singular instance of a 12 armed goddess hitherto discovered in Assam."[2]

On the hill is a modern shrine, the walls of which are built of the old bricks, plastered with mud and with the roof of corrugated iron-sheets. The shrine contains a circular stone tablet measuring four and a half feet in circumference. On this stone tablet are engraved the images of various planetary gods with the figure of Surya. "The sculpture is within a circle and the central figure which is within a circle is rimmed with another embossed circle. This is a male figure with four hands. Objects held in hands cannot be recognised. The god is four-faced, fourth one being on the back-side (not visible). The god is seated but his vehicle cannot be identified with precision. It may, however, be guessed that a swan has been depicted below, which is the *vahana* of Prajapati or Brahma. The central figure is surrounded by twelve miniature figures which are seated. Each of these twelve figures is one-faced and two-armed holding certain objects possibly lotuses.....The central figure is Kasyapa who is often called Prajapati or creator of beings. Surya is an Aditya, the son of Aditi, wife of Kasyapa. According to the Puranas the Adityas are sun-gods who are twelve in number. Thus these twelve miniature figures in a circle may be called the twelve Adityas with their father at the centre."[3]

1. *J.A.R.S.*; Vol. XIV, p. 111.
2. *Ibid*; Vol. II., No. I., p. 11.
3. *Ibid*; p. 111.

The *Kalika Purana* mentions the Sri Surya mountain which was the perpetual abode of the Sun God (*yatra deva adityah satatam sthitah*). The remains prove the prevalence of Sun-worship in early Assam.

2. THE HATIMURA TEMPLE

The present Hatimura temple, at Silghat, in Nowgong district, was probably built on the ruins of an old stone temple in the Saka year 1667 (1745-46 A.D.) in the reign of King Pramatta Singh of the Ahom dynasty. It is a brick temple which still exists although in a very dilapidated condition.

The presiding deity of the temple is the Mahisamardini. The goddess is represented with slender waist, broad breasts, ten hands, and holding different weapons in each hand. She is seen placing her right foot on the lion, and pressing the shoulder of the buffalo-demon with her left. She pierces the trident through the body of the demon, and has fastened his arm with a noose. To put her weight on the Asura, the goddess is slightly bent to the left. The lion is also represented attacking the demon. The whole composition of the goddess is as given in the text.

The temple was one of the important centres of Saktism in early Assam. At one time even human sacrifices were made at the altars of the temple. A big sword supposed to have been used for human sacrifices has been deposited in Assam Provincial Museum, Gauhati.

yanta-Dalai and Madhava-Dalai, Sankara set out on a long and extensive pilgrimage (1481 A.D.). He was accompanied by about seventeen companions including his former Guru Mahendra Kandali. The detailed account of this pilgrimage has been recorded in the biographies of Sankaradeva, compiled by his disciples. He visited most of the sacred places and temples of northern and southern India. Among the important places and temples that he saw were Gaya, Puri, Vrindavana, Mathura, Dwaraka, Kasi, Prayaga, Sitakunda, Varahakunda, Ayodhya and Badarikasrama. At these places, he came into contact with Vaishnavite teachers of various schools, and entered with them into many learned and theological discussions. The results of these discussions and the influences they exercised over his mind were reflected in the Vaishnavite movement which he subsequently started in Assam. After twelve years of such wandering through many sacred seminaries of Vaishnavite learning, Sankaradeva returned home a much-travelled man, acquiring firsthand knowledge of Vaishnavite theology, texts, mode of worship, and management of institutions.

Soon after his return, Sankara married again and removed his residence from Alipukhuri to a nearby village, Bardowa. Now his mission of life took a definite shape; he started with fresh impetus and vigorous enthusiasm his religious movement for mass conversion. At Bardowa, he set up a Satra (monastery), erected a Namghar and held religious discourses. Around him, he collect-

ed a group of devout disciples, and held daily devotional recitations known as *Namakirtana*.

During this time, he received a complete text of the *Bhagavata-Purana* from Puri through Jagadish Misra of Tirhhut. A miraculous story is told about his coming across with the *Bhagavata-Purana*. The Brahmana Pundit Jagadish Misra went to Puri to read out the *Bhagavata* in the temple of Jagannatha. In a dream, the Brahmana received a mandate from Jagannatha to the effect that he should proceed to Kamarupa and read out the *Bhagavata* to Sankaradeva. Jagadish Misra searched out Sankaradeva at Bardowa and read out the book before him. The Brahmana survived only a year after the mission of reading out all the twelve books of the *Bhagavata* to Sankara was fulfilled. Sankaradeva then began to study deeply the *Bhagavata* with its commentary, and seriously took up propounding and propagating the cult of Bhakti. He immediately set to translate the Purana into simple Assamese verse and started to compose many songs, narrative poems, and plays on the theme of the Purana.

At the age of sixty-seven (1516 A.D.) Sankaradeva had to leave his ancestral residence at Bardowa owing to the occasional disturbances created by the neighbouring Kachari king and his subjects. He therefrom removed to Gangmau and then to Dhuwahata, a place in the Majuli island on the Brahmaputra. For about fourteen years, he resided at Dhuwahata, and his stay here was marked by two important incidents. The first was the conversion of the famous Sakta scholar Madhavadeva, who

later on became the greatest apostle and the most formidable exponent of the tenets of Sankara. The second incident relates to Sankaradeva's encounter with the Ahom King Suhummung (1497-1539 A.D.). The Brahmanas accused Sankara before the Ahom king of preaching a religion unorthodox and not envisaged by the *Vedas*. The Ahom king summoned Sankara to argue with the Brahmanas of his court. Sankara defeated them and got off from the trial with credit.

In the meantime, another unhappy event took place which forced him to leave Ahom territory for ever. The Ahom king was engaged in the operations of elephant-catching, and directed Sankaradeva and his relatives in this work. The king made them erect a fence of wooden palisades and announced the penalty that those, in whose direction the elephant should break through, would be beheaded. Unfortunately, the elephants broke loose through the phalanx of Sankaradeva and his men. The Ahom monarch, therefore, directed to capture these men. Sankaradeva and a few others, however, escaped. But Madhavadeva and Hari, Sankaradeva's son-in-law, were both made captives. Madhavadeva was later on let off as he was a Sanyasi, but Hari was beheaded. For this unfortunate incident Sankaradeva left the Ahom kingdom for Kamarupa, then under the Hindu king of Cooch Behar. He journeyed to Barpeta (1546 A.D.), a place in the present district of Kamarupa, and at Patbausi, near Barpeta, Sankaradeva established a Satra with Namghar and dwelling huts for his followers. For

the rest of his life, he remained at the place in comparative peace. Here he used to hold regular religious discourses, recitations of the sacred texts, congregational prayers and dramatic performances. It should also be noted that the major portion of his religious writings, namely the songs, dramas and Kavyas were composed here. Sankaradeva here converted three Brahmana disciples, Damodaradeva, Harideva and Ananta Kandali. Damodaradeva (1488-1598) and Harideva (1493-1568), both with equal zeal, spread the teachings of Sankara and converted the Brahmanas to this new faith. On Sankaradeva's death they set up special sects after their own names.

After a few years of stay at Barpeta, Sankaradeva set out again on a pilgrimage near about 1550 A.D. He was accompanied by one hundred and twenty devotees. During this journey, he was said to have caught a glimpse of Chaitanya at Puri. Unfortunately, his biographies testify that he had no opportunity to talk with the great saint of Bengal. The other notable Vaishnava personality he came into contact with in this journey was the granddaughter of Kabir.

On return from second pilgrimage, Sankaradeva resumed his customary works of prayer, meditation and *nam-kirtan*, and gave religious instructions, and initiation to a large number of people. But the Brahmana pundits of king Naranarayana's court did not like the growing popularity of Sankaradeva's activities, which they considered *mleccha acaras* or non-Vedic. King Naranarayana (1540-

1584) summoned Sankaradeva to his court and the saint by his scholarship and erudition defeated the Brahmana pundits in a contest. Sankaradeva then expounded before the king the main principles of the *bhakti-dharma* with relevant citations from the *Bhagavata Purana* and other Vaisnava texts. The king was convinced about the superiority of Sankaradeva's creed and was deeply moved by his majestic personality. He honoured the saint with valuable presents and assured royal patronage towards propagation of the Bhakti movement in his kingdom. The king even expressed his desire to become his disciple but Sankaradeva declined to give him initiation, as he thought that it would not be possible for kings to observe the religious and ethical code of his religion. Sankaradeva came back to Barpeta, but both the king and his brother Cilarai invited him on several occasions to Cooch Behar for holding religious discussions. Cilarai built for him a Satra, near the capital, which was known as Bheladanga Satra. Here, the great saint who gave to Assam a new way of thinking about God and man, passed away in 1569 A.D. Before his death, Sankaradeva nominated his devout disciple Madhavadeva to the apostolic seat, disregarding the claims of his son, who was also a devout Vaisnava. From Madhavadeva's time, the Ekasaranadharma came to be known as Mahapurushiya as Madhava was looked upon by the disciples as the Mahapurusha, the great spiritual leader who led the way in devotion to the faith of Sankara.

II

Sankaradeva was not a philosopher, nor did he endeavour to evolve a new philosophy. Nevertheless, his literary works are pointers to the facts that he was steeped in the lore of Hindu philosophy. The philosophical basis of his religion, historically speaking, is the culmination of the Bhakti movement of Northern India augmented by Ramananda, and of Southern India. Sankaradeva holds that God is the central Reality of soul and matter and neither can exist without Him. They exist in Him and are inseparable. In *Kirtana Ghosha,* he writes:

Tumi Paramatma jagatara Isa ek
Eko bastu nahike tomata byatirek

"Thou art the Supreme self
the only Lord of the Universe,
There is no other thing except Thee"

and

Krisnara carana cintiveka hridayata
Asanta Isvara Hari samasta bhutata

"Think of Krishna's feet in thine heart,
Knowest thou that God is in the hearts of all."

On the metaphysical plane, Sankaradeva holds a non-dualistic standpoint, unlike many of his Vaisnava counter-parts in the rest of India. This explains the absence of dual-images in his religion such as Radha-Krishna of Caitanya, Gopi-Krishna of Vallabhacharya, Rukmini-Krishna of Namadeva and Sita-Ram of Ramananda. He gives unambiguous expression of this faith:

Prakriti Purusa duiro niyanta Madhava
Samastare atmat Hari parama bandhava

"Madhava is the guide of both Prakriti
(Matter) and Purusha (Mind);
Hari is the most faithful friend of all."

Sankaradeva accepts as ultimate three kinds of substance, matter (*acit*), soul (*cit*) and God (*Isvara*). According to him, the subtle *jivas* and the subtle material powers of the universe emanate from Paramatman, from whom both conscious and the unconscious parts of the universe sprang forth.

In the cosmic pattern of Sankaradeva, though Jivatma emanates from Paramatma, both are not conceived as identical and co-extensive. They have their independent entities. In spite of their independent existence, Jivatma and Paramatma are interrelated. In the process of unfolding the Brahman, *maya* shrouds the happiness and joy that are inherent in the real nature of Jivatma. Therefore, the longing of Jiva for Brahman is often shifted through the agency of *maya*. Sankaradeva prescribes a mode by which Jivatma can purify itself. This mode is constant meditation of the name of God.

The concept of ideal meditation has been expressed by Sankaradeva in terms of a symbol throughout his works. Uddhava, the attendant-disciple of Krishna is the symbol of Jivatma with its longing to merge in the resplendent glory of Paramatma. According to Sankaradeva, through the constant meditation after the pattern of Uddhava, Jiva can be assured of its liberation from the bondage of birth.

Sankaradeva propagated his new religion at a time when ritualism was gaining ground with occasional intrusions of ultra-religious animism and occultism. In order to do away with the mushroom growth of gods, he was logically proceeding against the theological basis of polytheism. He emphasised the unity of essential Godhead. In the cosmology of Sankaradeva, God is the absolute reality. He is the material cause as well as the efficient cause of the universe. He is endowed with all auspicious and excellent attributes which are unsurpassable. Sankaradeva considers the Absolute Brahman as Narayana, the only object of adoration. In *Kirtan Ghosha* he states:

Prathame pranamo Brahmarupi sanatana
Sarva avatarar karana Narayana

"At the outset, I bow down to Narayana, the Eternal One in the form of Brahma, the cause of all incarnations."

God is infinite and indeterminate. He is the primus of the universe, the universe has its being in Him, and returns unto Him. He is the cause and final solace of the universe. He is without a beginning, all purity, all knowledge, all delight and everlasting. In *Kalidaman Nat*, Sankaradeva says:

"Salutation to Narayana of the immeasurable power; thou art the cause of the causes, yet no cause at all. Thou hast no beginning, end or interruption. All blissful God, I bow down to Thee. Salutation to Thee God, whose magnanimity is unknowable. Spreading over the world Thou art uphold-

ing it. Thou art watching and protecting all living beings. From Thee emanate creation, preservation and destruction."[1]

Sankaradeva has thus maintained that God is the first and the final cause of creation. The change of the body from subtle to gross state does not affect the nature of God, because it is His body that undergoes modification, while as the soul of the cosmic body He remains unchanged. Thus the self determining Isvara is the Absolute of Sankaradeva. The following may be taken to indicate Sankaradeva's conception of Godhead:—

"I bow to Thee, Oh Madhava, Thou art the lawgiver to him who creates the laws. Thou art the parent of the world. Thou art the mind of the world. Thou art the destiny of the world.

"Thou art the creator, Thou art the cause, static and dynamic, Thou art all, like as gold is unto ornaments of gold.

"Thou art plants and trees, Thou art birds and beasts, Thou art gods and non-gods.

"The ignorant think of Thee as different for want of illumination.

"Infatuated every moment with Thy illusion, none knowest Thee for the soul. Thou residest in the heart of all beings: but people search Thee without, not understanding Thee.

"Thou art the only truth, all else is false. The wise know this and contemplate Thee in their hearts.

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1. Tr. H.N. Dutta Baruah.

"I crave not for enjoyment of beatitude, I long not for salvation, only let there be devotion at Thy feet."[2]

Sankaradeva preached a religion of supreme surrender to One, Vasudeva Krishna, also known as Vishnu, Narayana, Rama, Hari and therefore, his creed is known as *Ekasaraniya nama dharma*. He upheld the philosophy of oneness in all. He comprehended one God, Krishna, one service, the service of Krishna, the Supreme Brahma. The worship of other gods and goddessess is strictly prohibited. This has been been made clear by Krishna in the *Bhakti-pradipa:*

Eka citte tumi moka matra kara sera,
Parihara durate yateka ana deva.
Huyoka saranapanna eka mote matra,
Moke bhaja huiba tere mukutira patra,
Nama nusuniba tumi ana devatara,
Yena mate nuhibe bhakti vyabhicara.

"Devote yourself to me with a single mind,
Forsake from a distance all other gods.
Surrender yourself to me alone,
Devote to me, then will you be fit for salvation.
Never listen to names of other gods,
That your devotion may remain unsullied."

Sankaradeva admitted the conception of Krishna, the Parabrahma, based on the *dasama* of the *Bhagavata:*

Satyavritam satyaparam trisatyasya yonim nihitancha satya

2. Dr. B. Kakati; *Sankaradeva;* p. 54.

ing it. Thou art watching and protecting all living beings. From Thee emanate creation, preservation and destruction."[1]

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"The ignorant think of Thee as different for want of illumination.

"Infatuated every moment with Thy illusion, none knowest Thee for the soul. Thou residest in the heart of all beings: but people search Thee without, not understanding Thee.

"Thou art the only truth, all else is false. The wise know this and contemplate Thee in their hearts.

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1. Tr. H.N. Dutta Baruah.

only through the will of God. The effect of obligatory duties is not destroyed, except in so far as it produces meritorious results and helps the rise of the true knowledge; when the true knowledge dawns it does not further show itself. That is why it is regarded as the best means. In *Kirtan Ghosha*, he says:

"He who sees Vishnu in the entire world gets salvation forthwith even while alive. Of all the means by far the best is to deem all creatures as one's own self."

Sankaradeva regards *bhakti* as superior to *mukti*. *Bhakti* is also described as being itself the emancipation. In *Bhakti-ratnakara*, he says:—

"Though the state of liberation is all happiness, yet *bhakti* is superior to *mukti*, in as much as, the latter is devoid of joy inherent in the service to the Lord, while the bliss of *mukti* is inherent in the former, (*bhakti*)." Therefore, according to him, liberation is inherent in *bhakti* and automatically takes its own course.

Bhakti consists in the firm and overwhelming affection for God with a full sense of His greatness; through this alone can there be emancipation. Though *bhakti* is the *sadhana* and *moksha* is the goal, yet it is the *sadhana* stage that is the best. Those who enter into the bliss of Brahman have the experience of that bliss in their selves; but those devotees who do not enter into this state nor into the state of *Jivan-mukti* are better than the *jivan-muktas*. The supreme devotion is superior to *jnana*, *karma* and *yoga*. In the *Bhagavata* Sankaradeva says:—

Satyasya satyamrita satyanetram satyatmakam tvam saranam prapanna.

Sankaradeva believed in incarnations (*avataras*) of Godhead because his unmanifested and unqualified God may be brought to show manifestations by virtue of devotion. Elsewhere he says:—

Nahi janma tomar tathapi janma dhara
Sehi janme jivar janama dur kara.

"Thou hast no birth, yet Thou dost adopt them; and thereby, Thou removeth the birth of creature."

Krishna was regarded by Sankaradeva as the highest, best and the most ideal divinity. His appearance in the form of Vishnu-Narayana in the celestial Vaikuntha with His liberated devotees and attendants is the supreme manifestation.

This picture of God with his liberated devotees leads to his concept of *moksha*. It is the goal which every pious soul pines for. Since bondage is due to the attachment of worldly objects, liberation is possible through realisation of God. This is produced in various ways, viz., experience of the sorrows of worldly existence, renunciation of all desires of enjoyment of pleasures, whether in this world or in some heavenly world, self-control and self-discipline, association of good teacher, respectful attachment to God, love for one's equals, complete resignation to God, etc.

Sankaradeva is of the view that liberation can be attained even while alive, which is called *Jivan-mukti*. True knowledge destroys all merit and demerit, and so in the *Jivan-mukti* man holds his body

still Thou hast not attained to the Lord
and comest to the world again and once again.
Thou spendest Thy years in meditation
and penance, in pilgrimage,
in dwelling in Gaya and Kasi,
Thou knowest the arguments of *Yoga*
but the mind is clouded.
Thou know this: except through supreme
devotion, there is no liberation.
Entire virtue remains hidden within the name
of Rama;
This is the final message of all the *sastras*.
The name of the Lord devoutly taken
is the sole religion of the Kali era.
We know of it but grasp not the essence,
Says Sankara, transient is this body;
Never again wilt thou gain this;
Cast off all pride of action
and think of the feet of Hari
With the sole devotion of Thy heart.

Sankaradeva has prescribed certain qualifications necessary for a real Bhakta. He must possess the qualities of sympathy, beneficence, forgiveness, softness of heart and complete mastery over his passions. He seems to have laid more emphasis on the control of the senses. This has been clearly explained in his *Balichalan*.

Above all, Sankaradeva propagated *nama-dharma* as practical method to *mukti*. *Nama Dharma* consists in chanting the name of the supreme self with undeviating devotion, being pure in heart, thought and action.[1] The advantage of reciting the

"If acts are done with sinful motive, no virtue results. In this dire Iron age evil-intentioned people have no competence for any act whatsoever. Just as neither earth nor plenty of water can purify gold but only repeated heating of it on the fire can do purifying; so by practising penance, mutterings, sacrifices and yogic exercises trouble is counted in vain, since the knot of action is not severed unless God is enshrined in the heart. Let me tell you this truth: the heart cannot be purified by worshipping gods, by practising *yoga*, by taking ablution in all sacred waters, nor by donation, fasting and penance. I cite you, Oh Parikshit, this essence of the scriptures: in Iron age no rescue is there like purifying the mind by harbouring the God of the world in the heart."[3]

Sankaradeva maintained that *bhakti marga* is the one and the only way to realise God. In this Bhakta sees the Lord in everything in the world and finds Him revealing Himself in the form of Love. It is easier to picture God as Love than to conceive of the Absolute as Truth. Above all, it is suited to all irrespective of caste, creed or colour. It may be remembered here that a real Bhakta will not seek salvation and his constant wish is to remain in a state of perpetual enjoyment of *bhakti*. That is why he prays to God thus:

Thou physician of the soul,
Thou hast not seen the easiest remedy.
Thou hast done a thousand works,

3. Tr. H. N. Dutta Baruah.

denly, it flashed to his mind that devotion to Hari might save him from this predicament. So he prayed to Vishnu with devotion by holding a lotus with his trunk:—

Ehi buli maranato nabhila vikala
Sunde merai dharilanta suvarna Kamala
Parama anande Madhavata diya citta
Gajendra karila stuti ati viparita

"Thus thought he, and cast away all fear of death; with his trunk he caught hold of a golden lotus; with great joy and faith in Madhava, Gajendra began to worship Him intensely."

Vishnu came and rescued his distressed devotee in time. Since the devotional acts are bound to bring good results, Sankaradeva asserts that it is the supreme religion. As he says:—

"All religions take shelter under the name of Krishna. All religious rites become completely accomplished by meditating *nama*."

The natural and inalienable attachment of the mind of the devotee to God is called Prema-bhakti; it is five-fold: *santa* (peaceful love), *dasya* (service of God), *sakhya* (friendship with God), *vatsalya* (filial attitude towards God), and *Madhurya* (sweet love or love of God as one's lover). Sankaradeva advocated the *dasya* type of *bhakti*. In fact, servanthood of devotee and God as master is the keynote of Sankarite works. It may be noted here that all the writers of Sankaradeva's school style themselves 'servants unto the Lord' at the end of each section of their books. In Dasama, Sankaradeva says:—

name of Hari is that everybody can do it, irrespective of age, caste, stage of life, time or place. In *Bhakti-ratnakara,* he says:—

Aponara namar sanga nacarata Hari
Yeyi nama seyi Hari jana nista kari.

"Hari never shuns the company of His name. It is absolutely certain that *nama* is Hari Himself."

Sankaradeva explains the merits of the chanting of the name of Hari in the *Ajamilopakhyana* (the story of Ajamila). This story taken from the *Bhagavata* narrates the story of a Brahmana who lived in open sin with a Sudra harlot and broke all laws sacred to his caste in maintaining his mistress and the ten children begotten of this woman. At the time of his death the sinful Ajamila called his youngest son Narayana to him and because he happened to utter the name of Narayana (which is also the name of God) at the time of death, the soul of the Brahmana was taken to the abode of Visnu and not to the city of Yama. Thus it clearly shows that even an unconscious recital of the name of God brings salvation to hard sinners just as abdominal disease is cured by even an unconscious swallowing of a powerful medicine (*Yena mahausadhi najani bhunjile taro garbha roga hare*).

The merit of devotion is also propounded through the well known story of Prahlada in the poem *Prahlada-Carita.* The same doctrine is made explicit in *Gajendropakhyana.* It describes a curious battle scene between Graha (crocodile) and Gajendra (elephant). Gajendra was overpowered by Graha and he was counting the hour of death. Sud-

In another place he says:—

"As the branches, leaves and foliage of a tree are nourished by pouring water only at the root of the tree, as limbs of the body are nourished by putting food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of Krishna."[4]

In short, there is only one God, one mode of worship and there is none else but one. This religion knows no caste, and universal spirit is the main principle of this faith. Mahapurushiyadharma is another name for this faith, because Sankaradeva's object of worship, the All-Pervasive, Parama-Brahma, to whom devotee is to take shelter, is so described in the *Bhagavata*. It had universal appeal and therefore people of all castes could embrace it.

III

Sankaradeva's religion has many institutional aspects, and these exercise even today a tremendous influence on the cultural, social and community life of the Assamese people. As an institution, it may be considered mainly in two major aspects: the Satras and Namghars.

The word 'Satra' was used to denote a place of religious gathering. In the words of Bhatta Deva, "Where ardent devotees perform duties pleasing to God, where nine-fold *bhakti* prevails, that supreme place adorned by Gods and Vaishnavas is called a

4. Dr. B. Kakati: *Op. Cit.*, p. 40.

"Lord of the world, You can prove the minds of all; I dedicate my body to You. Snap the chine of my foolishness. Henceforward, I am Your bond slave; Have mercy on me, Oh pivot of the world."

Thus Sankaradeva laid more emphasis on the doctrine of *bhakti*, particularly of the *dasya* type.

Again, as a practical *sadhana*, Sankaradeva adopted *Sravana* (listening) and *Kirtana* (chanting). *Sravana-Kirtana* is necessary for the purification of the mind which in turn leads to supreme devotion. In *Bhakti-pradip*, he says:—

"Oh friend, rely upon my words, I do my deeds in the shape of Sravana-Kirtana disregarding all other Deva-dharmas; certainly you will attain salvation with ease."

Further he says:—

"At the beginning Prajapati brought the four *Vedas* and searched them thrice turning the pages. The Creator at last found this truth in the *Vedas* that Harikirtan is the only essence and the way by which people attain salvation out of this troublesome world. Specially in this age of Kali, this is the only great religion. So give up all other religions and follow this."

Sankaradeva preached a religion of supreme surrender to One and the worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. It has been said by Sankaradeva himself that a "Vaisnava should not worship any other god except Vishnu, he should not enter any other god's temple, nor should he partake of the offerings made to any other god. In so doing *bhakti* would be vitiated.

Whether original or branch, the Satras have huge establishments, departments and a great number of structures. The main buildings of a Satra consists of Karapat, Namghar or Kirtanghar, or Manikut, Hati and the Satradhikar's or Mahanta's residence. Each Satra has usually four Karapat, gateways, and in the midst stands the Namghar or Kirtanghar, the main prayer hall. Adjoining it, is the Manikut, a small building in which is placed the *singhasana* (a wooden throne which stands on four carved lions) or *thapana,* altar, which contains the main object of worship, usually a copy of the *Bhagavata-Purana* in manuscript. In passage of time, some Satras began to lose the rigour of their injunctions against idolatry and as a consequence some Satras, particularly the Satras established by the Brahmana leaders, came even to place an image of Krishna. It appears, however, that the image is kept more with an eye towards decoration and to attract converts than as a necessary paraphernalia of the religious worship. Around the *thapana* are many sacred objects; earthen lamps and incense are also burnt before it. The Hatis are group of huts placed on the four quarters of the compound where the monks live in their own cell. Describing the general set-up of a Satra, the District Gazetteers of the Sibsagar District, 1905 writes, "There is something singularly gracious and pleasing in the whole atmosphere of the place. Everything is fresh and neat, and well to do. The well groomed smiling monks are evidently at peace with themselves and with the world at large, and even the little boys who

Satra. Vaishnavas residing there are naturally prone to Harinama."

The Satras are like mediaeval monasteries or *maths*. They were originally established at places away from the humdrum of life; and the first Satra was set up by Sankaradeva near his ancestral village at Bardowa. Later on Satras grew up at all places where Sankaradeva stayed during his movements from Bardowa to Barpeta. But more Satras came into existence when differences of opinion arose amongst the followers after Sankaradeva's death, particularly between his Brahmana and Sudra followers. The first Brahmana seceders who established independent Satras were Damodaradeva and Harideva. Later on the Brahmana preachers founded four important Satras in Upper Assam, namely, Garamur, Kuruabahi, Auniati and Dakhinpat. After the death of Madhavadeva, who became the chief apostle after Sankaradeva, the schism in the Sankarite sect widened and consequently several sub-sects or Samhatis grew up. Some of the major sub-sects are Brahma-Samhati, Kala-Samhati, Nika-Samhati and Purusha-Samhati. As the disciples of these sub-sects spread their activities, their missionary outposts became branch Satras, and the original centres became the headquarters. The branch Satras founded by the Brahmana preachers usually follow the pattern of the Bamuniya Satras, like the Auniati or Dakhinpat, the other follows the set-up of Bardowa or Barpeta and derived inspiration from them.

congregational prayer, Bharali, store-keeper, Sravani, hearers, who are to listen daily to recitations and expositions of the scriptures, Athpariya, who keeps vigil over the Satra and arranges lights in the Namghar, and Hatimata who summons the monks in the Hatis to prayer services.

Functionaries are appointed to organise religious music and to enact dramatic performances. The Gayan, singers, and the Bayan, players of musical instruments are in charge of the monastical orchestra, and they arrange music in religious services, festivals and in *bhawana*, religious performances.

Besides the ecclesiastical structure, the Satras developed various conventions and ideas, a fixed order of congregational worship, a systematic set of beliefs, i.e., the theology and a body of sacred writings in Assamese including psalms and hymns. It is relevant to note in this connection that the congregation sings only hymns of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and those composed by the saints of the respective Satras and not by private persons.

Prasangas or devotional services where the congregation assemble at specified hour for community worship and singing are held all through the day under the leadership of the Satradhikar. According to the orthodox code fourteen *prasangas* are held, five in the morning, three in the afternoon and six in the evening. On religious festivals, elaborate ceremonies, featured by *prasangas* and *nama-kirtan*, musical singing of Lord's praise, are held and they are attended by the laity from different places. In these religious services, songs are

flock around them are usually clean and well behaved. These children are recruited from the neighbouring villages and trained up to be Bhakats, but if at any time they find the rituals of celibacy irksome, they are at liberty to return to the outer world."

To educate the Bhakats in religious learning and to train them in monastic life as well as to look after the administration of the establishments, the Satras have different ecclesiastical order and a hierarchy of officers. The ecclesiastical order consists of Satradhikars or Mahants, Bhakats, Sisyas, laity, both men and women. Besides, there is a class of special Bhakats called Kewaliyas, celibates who have forsaken the world in early life and residing in a Satra devote themselves to rigorous discipline, religious life and practices.

The entire administration is run by the Satradhikar. In some Satras, he is designated as Mahanta or Gosain, and he is a lifelong celibate. In some Satras, however, the Satradhikars are allowed to lead a house-hold life. It should be noted that the Satra-institutions gave rise to a new priest class appointed from the Sudras having position of spiritual power and social importance equal to Brahmanas. Along with it, the Satras introduced the system of worship of saints and the veneration of relics, particularly *pada-silas*, the foot-marks.

Other important functionaries are Bhagavati, the reciter and expounder of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the Pathak, the reader of the religious texts, Deuri, the distributor of *mah-prasad*, sacred offerings after

congregational prayer, Bharali, store-keeper, Sravani, hearers, who are to listen daily to recitations and expositions of the scriptures, Athpariya, who keeps vigil over the Satra and arranges lights in the Namghar, and Hatimata who summons the monks in the Hatis to prayer services.

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sung, religious texts are chanted and recited and extracts from the biographies of the saints are read out to the gathering. At these services drums are beaten, cymbals are tinkled, earthen lamps are lighted and sacred food is offered. At the close of the services *mah-prasad* is distributed to the gathering.

It should be noted that the Satras work both as seats of religious learning and residential schools. The Bhaktas live here under the guardianship of the Satradhikar, who is responsible both for their temporal welfare and spiritual progress. Further, each pupil monk when he comes to enter the monastic life is immediately placed under the charge of a senior or elderly Bhakat. During the probationary period the pupil-monk serves as *aldhara* or personal attendant to the senior Bhakat, who as a guide train him in monastic life, discipline, liturgy and doctrinal practices. The pupil-monks also receive education from other functionaries of the Satra, particularly from Bhagavati and Pathak. They impart instructions both orally and through written tests and services. Monks are further commissioned to translate Sanskrit texts to Assamese, and compose original works either in Sanskrit or Assamese. It is a customary practice with the monks to copy and illustrate manuscript, and to compile *Carit-puthis*, biographies of Vaisnava saints and leaders of Satras to illustrate Vaisnavite ideal of individual life.

Occasionally, discussions and debates are held in the Satras to which religious leaders and scholars from other places are invited. These meetings

provide opportunities to the monks for solving many of their difficult problems arising out of the texts they have been studying. As Sir Richard Livingstone remarks, there is much to be said for these methods of debate and discussion in the old system of education. In discussion a man finds out what he does not know, what he has overlooked, where he is mistaken, and—not less important—what he does really know and believe, where he is right: the soft strata of mere opinion is washed away by the steady spray of argument, and the hard rock remains. In discussion too he shares new experiences, and, in commerce with stronger minds, is lifted to higher levels and discerns new landscapes in the world of being. Much of this can be had through books, but not all. They suffer from the grave disadvantage of not being able to ask or answer questions. (*Some Tasks for Education*). All these go to produce within the Satra successful teachers, religious leaders as well as eminent poets, scholars and philosophers.

Besides religious education and monastic practices, the Bhakats are engaged in secular learning such as cultivation of arts and crafts. Since converts are drawn mainly from the villages, they naturally bring with them the skill and technique of their village crafts. They are occupied in buildings and repairing the Namghars and their own dwelling huts and decorating them. They make various useful articles of wood, bamboo, reed and ivory, and the articles required in dramatic perfor-

mance. They undertake to copying and illustrating manuscripts as an act of piety and devotion.

The monks are taught music both vocal and instrumental by the Gayan and the Bayan. Sankaradeva was himself a master singer and an excellent instrument player. The musical instrument, *khol*, is said to have been invented by Sankaradeva.

Dancing too forms a part of education of young pupil-monks. Various forms of religious dances like Sutradhari, Cali or Natuwa, Krishna and Gopi-nac were developed under the inspiration of the Satras. This tradition is still being kept alive by the bhakats of the Vaisnava Satras.

To run an institution with so many departments, naturally a large amount of money is required. Formerly, the Ahom kings and nobles contributed liberally, and large grants of revenue-free land were made by the Ahom kings, and this was subsequently confirmed by the British Government. The Satras derive income from other sources also. Every *sisya*, disciple, is expected to make an annual contribution either in cash or kind (*guru kar*). Further, fees are to be paid on the occasions of any birth, marriage or death in the family of the disciples. The Satras have a special set of officers known as Medhi, Rajmedhi, Sajtola and Pacani to collect fees and contributions from the lay disciples. These incomes serve to make the Satras extremely prosperous and enable them to run their large organisation.

The Satra organisation is very much interested in the organisation of the laity in the villages, and from the beginning of the movement this was done through the village Namghars. The Namghars which were set up as central religious institutions of the village worked to a large extent towards spread of intellectual and cultural activities in the village, and in course of time being nerve-centres of the village came to co-ordinate all the aspects of social, economic and political life of the Assamese people. Here not only *sastras* like the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata* are recited in a musical manner, Bargits are sung with proper melodies, *nam-kirtan*, singing the praises of the Lord, are held, dramatic performances are enacted, festivals are celebrated but greater problems of life, philosophy and religion are also discussed and debated. The Namghars further serve as Panchayat-hall, where villagers gather to discuss and solve many of their day-to-day problems. These community centres have been found even to play political and judicial role.

Not only through daily *prasangas* and *nama-kirtans* but through celebrations of regularly recurring festivals followed the year round, the Namghars create religious enthusiasm among all ages and sexes of the people, and become the main centre of attractions and cultural activities. In addition to the festivals, certain days in the year set aside for commemoration of saints and Satradhikars are observed with fast, prayer services and dramatic entertainments. These religious observances na-

turally weave the faith into daily life of the people throughout the year.

As central authority, the Satras also diffuse spiritual education, regulate and control religious life and also administer moral discipline on the laity through the agency of the Namghars. The Satras very much encourage literacy and learning among the laity. They enforce that not only the bhakats should study but the laity also should read regularly the Vaisnava Sastras and remember them by heart. The Satra functionaries very frequently visit the outlying villages, come into close contact with the laity, make earnest efforts to familiarise them with liturgical and religious texts. They hold in the Namghars special religious discourses and recitals. In expounding the scriptures, they always bring them down to practical issues, with the idea of giving the people guidance for everyday living. They occasionally enquire into their faults and failings in religious life and recommend penance and punishment. The Satradhikars, accompanied by Satra functionaries pay periodical visits to the villages, and stay either in the Namghars or *Bahars*, temporary camps. "These progresses are generally attended with considerable pomp and dignity. If the journey is made during the rainy season, the Gosains and their followers travel in stately barges, whose carved prows and slender lines distinguish them from the ordinary rough built country-boats. Most of the Satras own one or more fine elephants, and these ponderous animals take a leading part in the procession that escorts the spiritual leaders of

the people. The Gosains themselves are carried in litters, drums are beaten and cymbals clashed before them; and when they alight they are not permitted to touch the ground with their bare feet."

The Satradhikars, during their periodical visits give *sarana* to new disciples, and *bhajana* to those who are already converted. The *sarana* or initiation is a simple ceremony which consists in taking refuge to four fundamental principles (*carivastu*) of the faith, namely, *nama*, reciting the name of the God, *dera*, surrender to God, *guru*, acceptance of a preceptor, and *bhakat*, delight in the company of religious brotherhood. The *bhajan* is an elaborate ceremony meant for spiritually advanced disciples. They also acquaint themselves with the spiritual problems for their *sisyas* and deliver sermons to rouse pious feelings, to strengthen conviction, to warn against dangers of faith, and to prepare for pure and moral life. The Namghar, therefore, is a very useful institution which constantly brings good-conduct, ethics, morals (*sadacara*) and cleanliness and personal hygiene (*saucacara*) to bear on the daily life of the villagers.

In main, the Namghars are public institutions and their affairs are conducted on a purely democratic basis, every house-holder in the village having an equal voice in the management of their affairs. The villagers with their combined labour and resources build and repair them, provide necessary articles, and look to their upkeep, and thus in diverse ways foster social solidarity and discipline.

It is relevant to note that women have also

specific duty to perform in the Namghars. Women from each household by rotation are to sweep and clean the Namghars daily. They are allowed to receive initiation; and they carry devotional chantings in the Namghars, of course, not simultaneously with the men disciples. Although women saints are not met with in other Vaisnava sects, it is only in Sankaradeva's faith that women have been found as heads of Satras. Sankaradeva's grand-daughter-in-law, Kanaklata became not only the head of a Satra but she herself appointed twelve Satradhikars to set up and organise more Satras.

One other notable contribution of the Satras is their works towards the upliftment and betterment of the backward classes and the bordering tribes of Assam. Sankaradeva, from the very beginning of his missionary career led a crusade against caste exclusiveness and untouchability and strove for a recognised equality of all men irrespective of caste or character in the eyes of God, and exhibited deep sympathy for the lower castes and down-trodden classes. He again and again emphasised on the *Bhagavata's* saying that even a Candala is purged of the impurity of his caste by firm devotion to God; and sincere faith and devotion alone can uplift the soul to eternal communion with God.

Even a Chandala, harnessed to sincere faith and devotion is dearer to God than a Brahmana, sadly lacking in faith.

Even a person of low birth is liberated from bondage if he utters the name of God only once.

Madhavadeva who became the chief apostle

after Sankaradeva, deputed several of his followers to Upper Assam to spread the teachings of the creed and to bring about an intellectual awakening in the non-Hindu tribes of the Ahom kingdom. Gopaladeva of the Bhavanipur Satra (1541-1611) made all efforts to introduce the message of Bhakti among the Barahis, Marans, Kacharis, and the Chutiyas of Upper Assam. The Dihing Satra which originated from Gopaladeva, did a great lot to educate and uplift many tribes of Upper Assam, and it not only admitted converts from the non-Hindu tribes but placed them on equal footing with the disciples of the higher castes. "The Dihing Satra and the Mayamara Satra" writes Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, "were the most prominent of the six Sudra monasteries of Upper Assam, associated with Gopaladeva. As they admitted converts from the non-Aryan tribes and placed them on an elevated footing, these two Satras became extremely popular. Though they had caste Hindus in their fold, such as Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalitas, their disciples consisted also of Kacharis, Ahoms, Kaivartas and Brittias; and in the case of Mayamara Satra, Chutiyas and Morans as well. The democratic basis on which the Satras were run drew new converts to their fold from the influence of the caste-ridden Satras specially of the Brahmanical Order. In course of time the Dihing and the Mayamara Satras grew to be strongholds of Sudra Vaisnavism in Upper Assam as opposed to Brahmanical monasteries." To quote Dr. Bhuyan again: "The message of the Kalasamhati Satras (of Gopaladeva) reached the very masses of the As-

samese nation. Those castes which are now denominated as 'depressed' were freely admitted into the fold of these Satras, and they gradually imbibed refined and enlightened ways of living. In other parts of India, the humiliation to which these unfortunates were subjected, drove them to the bosom of other religions; in Assam, the liberal policy of the Kalasamhati Satras endowed them with a sense of self-respect and individual value. These Satras made a great appeal to the unsophisticated Assamese people and thus they commanded unprecedented popularity."

The missionaries deputed by these Satras no doubt brought the cult of devotion and universal love and opened the doors of salvation to all tribes irrespective of caste and character but they also "introduced an unwanted gentleness and fervour, and tamed the rude manly savagery of Tantric worship and animism that used to prevail in many places before."

SOME IMPORTANT SATRAS

Of the important Satras, it would be sufficient if we discuss the Satras at Bardowa, Barpeta and Majuli island.

The Satra at Bardowa near Nowgong was set up by Sankaradeva in about 1484 A.D. immediately after his return from the first pilgrimage. He also erected a Namghar and held regularly religious discourses. Around him, he collected a group of devout disciples and held daily devotional recitations known as Nam-Kirtan. Sankaradeva stayed at Bar-

The Barpeta Satra remains to the present day as the main source of inspiration to the Vaisnavas of Assam. It is even now regarded as the headquarters of the Mahapurushiyas. On festivals like Janmashtami, Nandotsava, Dol-Jatra, Rasapurnima and on the observances of the saints' days, a large number of devotees visit the Satra and take part in the ceremonies. The Dol-Jatra is celebrated with great pomp even to-day.

MAJULI SATRAS

Majuli, an island in the river Brahmaputra, one of the biggest river islands of the world, is a famous centre of the religion of the Vaisnavas. It became the headquarters and the chief seat of the Satras founded by Brahmanas from the time of Rudra Singh (1696-1714 A.D.), the greatest of all the great Ahom rulers.

Majuli is situated in the neighbourhood of Jorhat, in Sibsagar district. Jorhat can be reached from Gauhati either by bus or by train or by air. From Jorhat one has to travel ten miles by bus to Naimati, a river ghat, from where the ferries take the visitors to Kamalabari, also a ghat on the Majuli island. Conveyances are available at this place which can be made use of by the pilgrims to visit the Satras.

Of the many Satras in the Majuli island, the Auniati Satra, Dakhinpat Satra, Garamur Satra and Kamalabari Satra are noteworthy.

The Auniati Satra was founded by Niranjanadeva, a distinguished disciple of Vamshigopal.

Niranjanadeva's purity of character and devotion to God drew admiration even from the Ahom King Jayadhvaj Singh (1648-1663 A.D) who himself became the saint's disciple and endowed the Satra with suitable land grants for the maintenance of the monks and the monastery.

Dakhinpat is another well-known Satra in the Majuli island established by Vanamalideva, another disciple of Vamshigopal. Vanamalideva was very strong in faith and devotion. He was honoured and treated with much respect by the reigning Ahom monarch Jayadhvaj Singh who made liberal gifts to the Satra.

Lakshminarayana, another saint of Damodaradeva sect and a passionate devotee, established the Garamur Satra in the Majuli island during the reign of Jayadhvaj Singh. It should be noted that under the patronage of the Ahom sovereigns, the Majuli Satras became famous centres of the Vaisnava faith, cultural activity and piety of the monks.

Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur are the principal Brahmanical Satras. The Satradhikars of these monasteries are strictly celibates. The Satradhikars for these Satras are elected from other Satras where married life is allowed. The chosen young man is brought into the Satra during his teen age and trained up in Vaisnava religion, philosophy and life. During the period of training this young devotee is called *Deka-Adhikar*, the young pontiff.

Besides Bardowa and Barpeta, these three Satras along with Kuruabahi Satras exercise tremendous influence on the life of the Assamese peo-

ple. They are even to-day the glorious religious institutions of Assam, and are not only the seat of religion, learning and education, but the very centre of traditional cultural activities like dance, drama, music and religious recitals. Judged by such external standards as landed estates, number of *sisyas* and *bhakats*, these Satras still claim to be the biggest religious institutions. In the hey-day of their glory, the income of these Satras went mainly to the welfare of the people by way of the promotion of learning, development of cultural activities and help to the needy.

Kamalabari Satra in the Majuli island was set up by Padma Ata who was a Sudra. He led a very simple and saintly life and attained high spiritual eminence. In course of years, inessential rites and unrecognised observances crept into the faith which Padma Ata and Mathura Das of Barpeta Satra reformed. They set up a refined sect called Nikasamhati. Padma Ata stressed the teachings of Sankaradeva that external things such as yogic exercise, sacrifice, bathing in holy river, pilgrimage, *sanyasa* and fasting do not purify a man as honest life, good company and love of all beings do. On the eve of his death, Padma Ata nominated his Brahmana disciple Shriram to the Adhikarship of the Kamalabari Satra. This is also an *Udasin* Satra, i.e., the head of the Satra is a celibate.

The above is an account of some of the important Satras which brought about a new orientation and salutary reformation in every aspect of Assamese life.

Mahanta: Leader of Satra; usually Sudra.
Mahapurushiya: Sankaradeva's sect.
Mah-prasad: Sacred offerings consisting of pulse, uncooked rice and fruit.
Manikut: Shrine: small house attached to Namghar where sacred text is placed on *thapana* or *singhasana.*
Medhi, Raj-Medhi: Officers who periodically supervise the religious life of the disciples.
Mekhela: Woman's lower garment.
Namghar: Prayer-hall; used mostly in Upper Assam.
Nam-kirtan: Community singing and praising of god.
Pacani: Officer who collects tithes and contributions from disciples.
Padasila: Foot-prints (of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva).
Pathak: Reciter of religious texts.
Prasanga: Religious service; matins.
Prasad: Sacred offering.
Saj-tola: Officer who collects contributions from disciples.
Samhati: Sect. The four principal Samhatis are: Brahma-Samhati, Kala-Samhati, Nika-Samhati and Purusa-Samhati.
Saran: Initiation.
Satra: Monastery.
Satradhikar: Head of Satra; pontiff.
Sisya: Laity.
Singhasana: Wooden throne standing on four carved lions; sacred text is placed on it for worship.
Sravani: Devotees especially appointed to listen to reading and expounding of sacred texts at services.
Than: Sacred place; Satra.
Thapana: Altar; place set up for worship.
Udasin: Unmarried; celibate.

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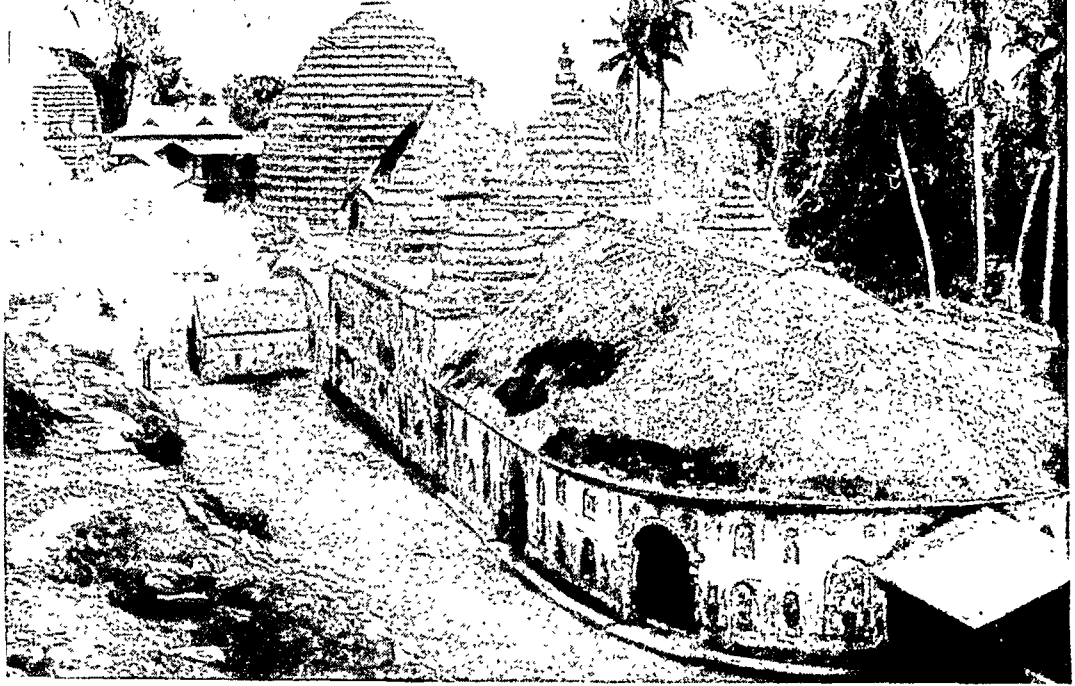
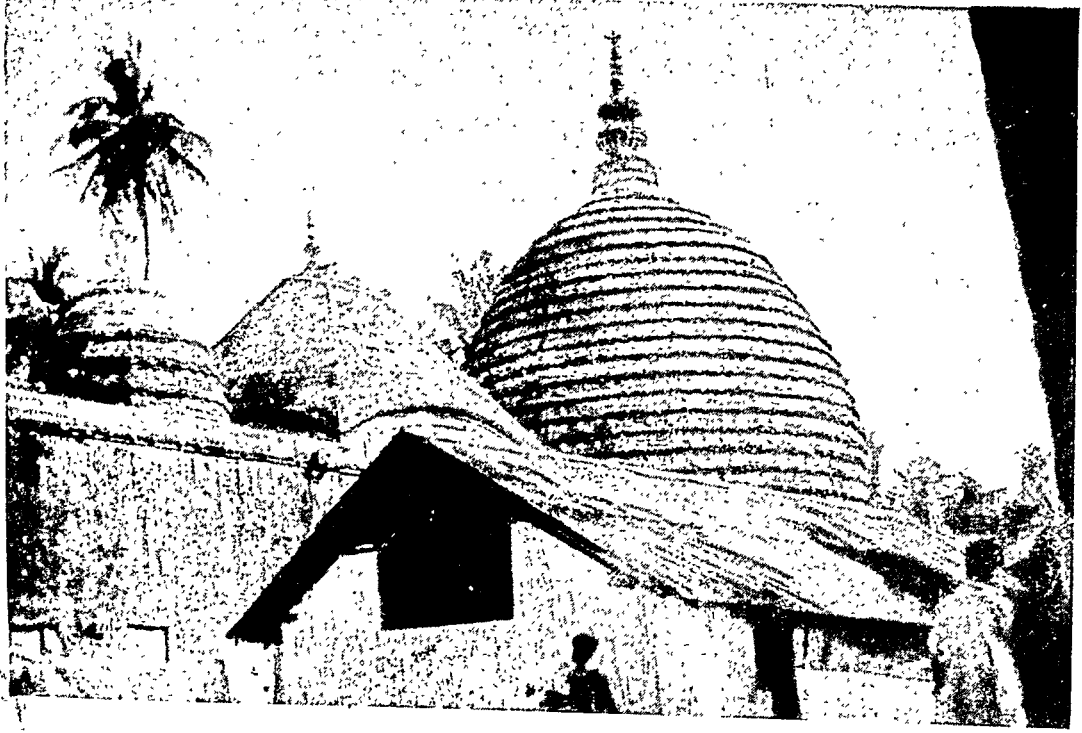
General view of Kamakhya, Asvakranta and Umananda temples



Kamakhya temple

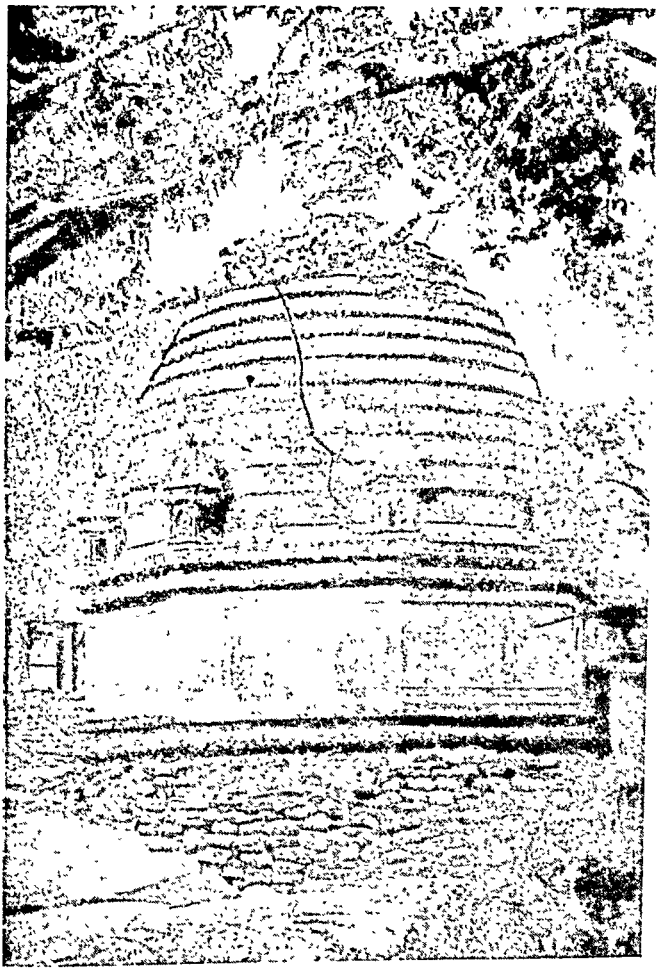


Kamakhya (side view)

Bhuvaneswari temple (Kamakhya Hill)

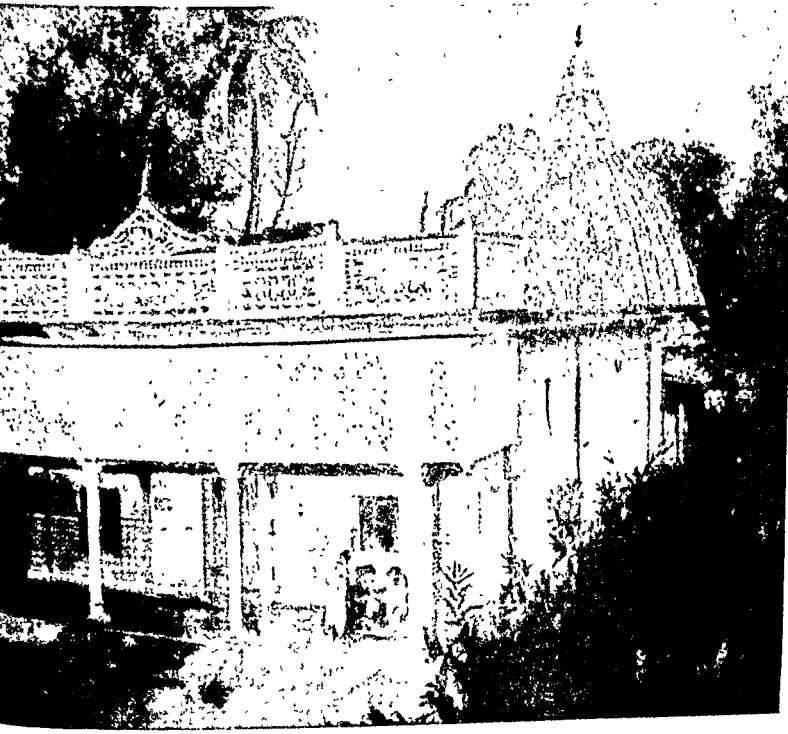
Stone Stair-case leading to the Kamakhya temple

Aswakranta temple

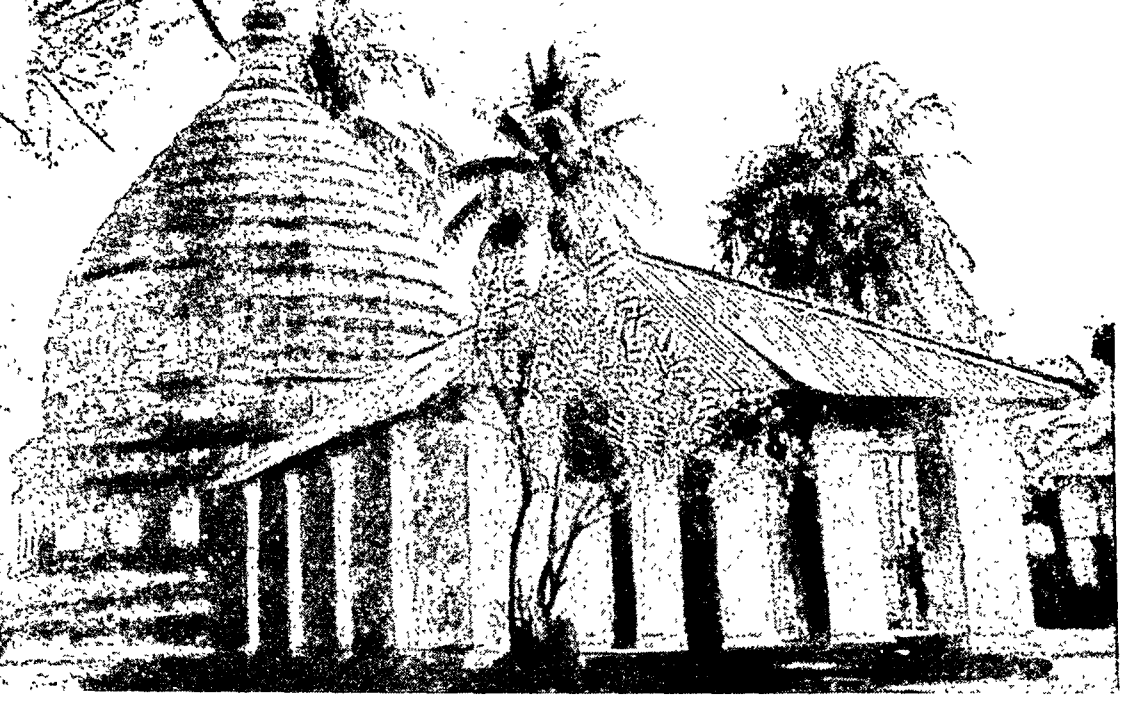


Temple of Vasistha

General view of the temple of Umananda

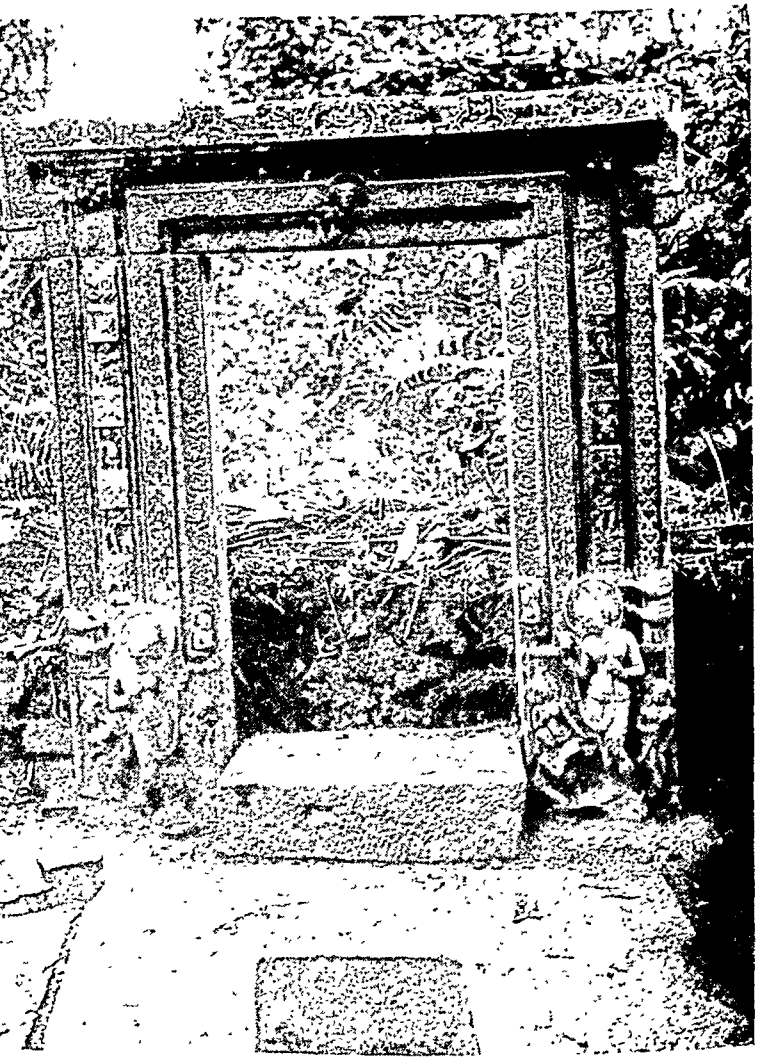


Umananda temple (front view)

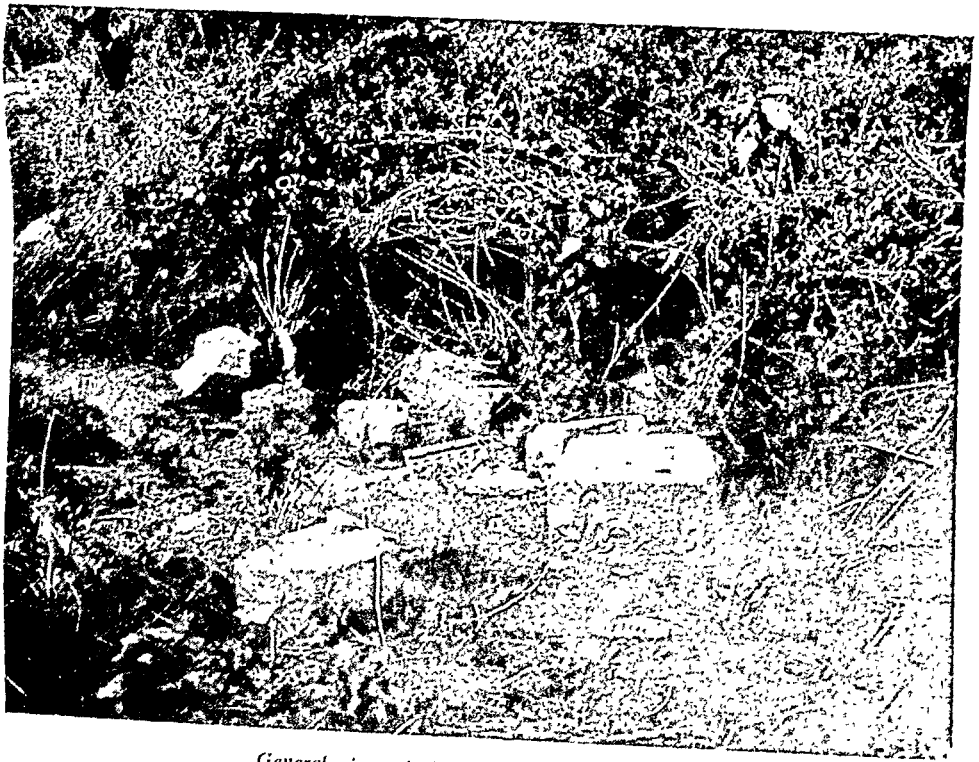


Temple of Ugra Tara

Navagraha temple

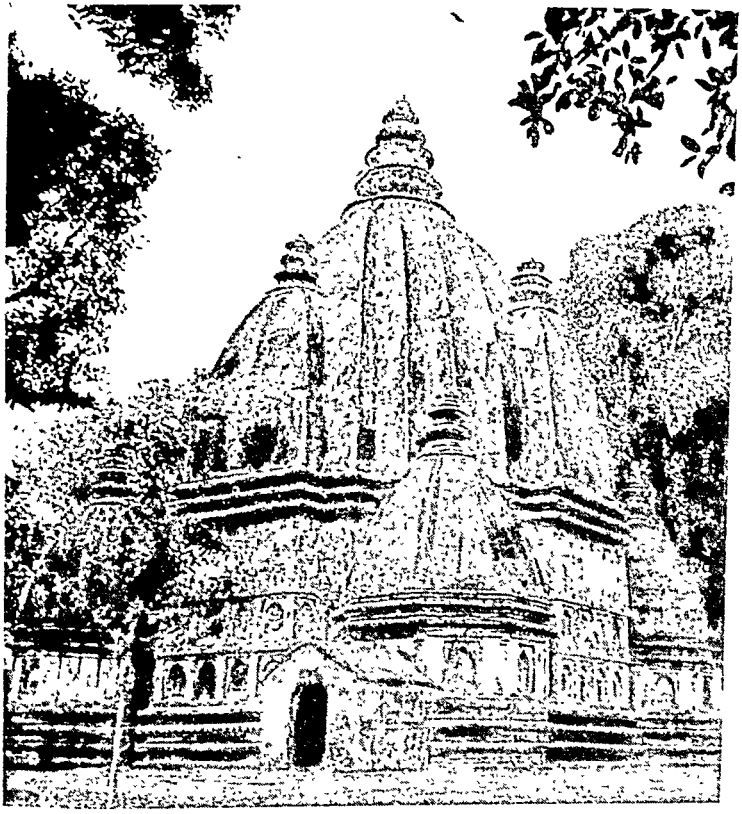


Stone Door-Frame-Dalu Parbatia

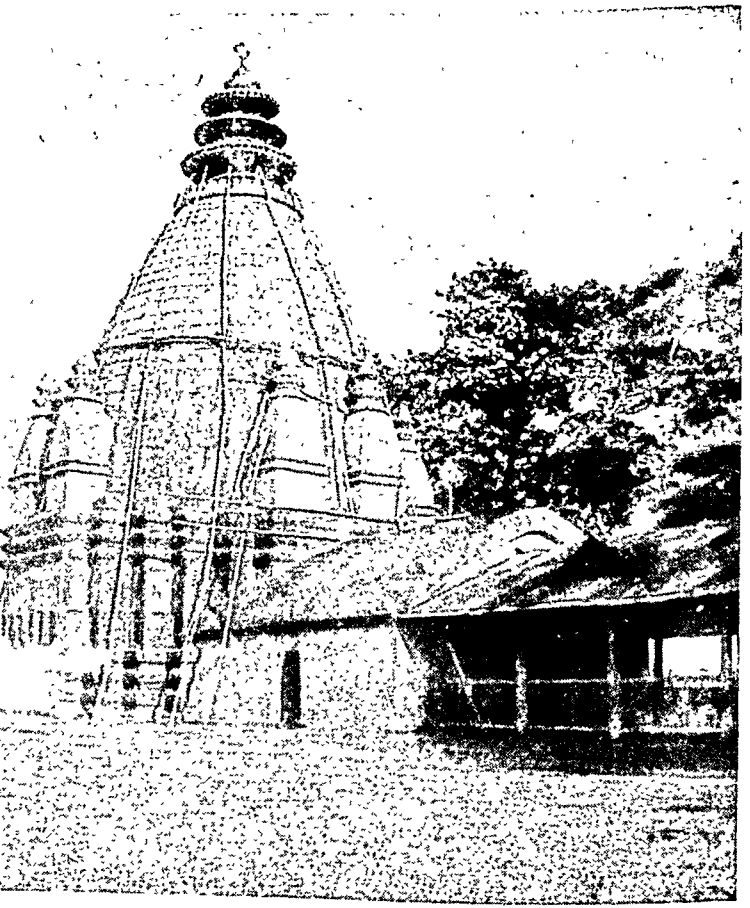


General view of the ruins at Fi

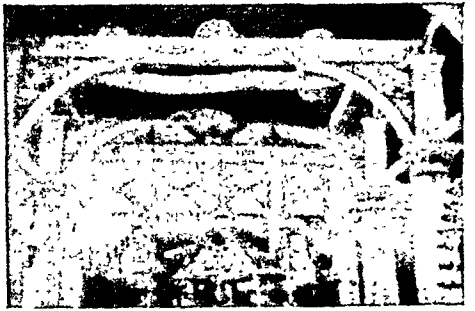
General view of Bamuni Hill Ruins



Siva temple at Negriting



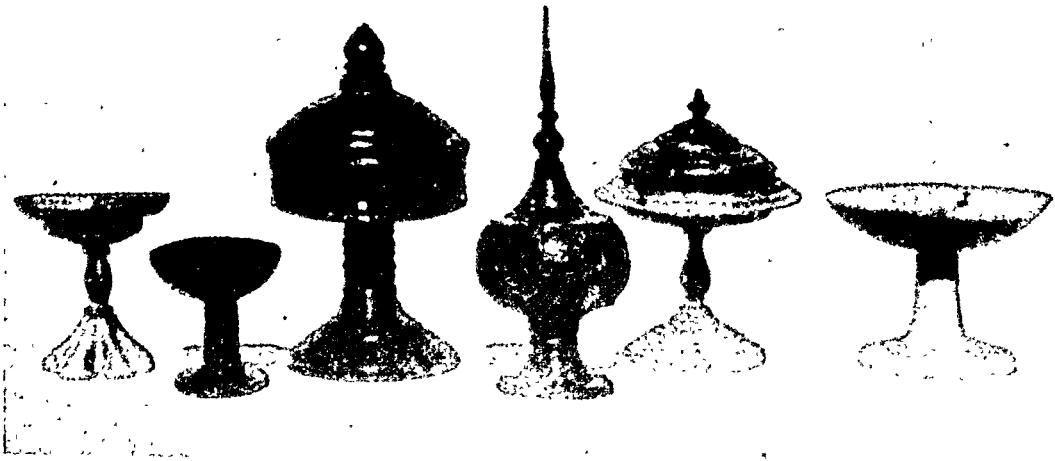
Vishnu Dol temple



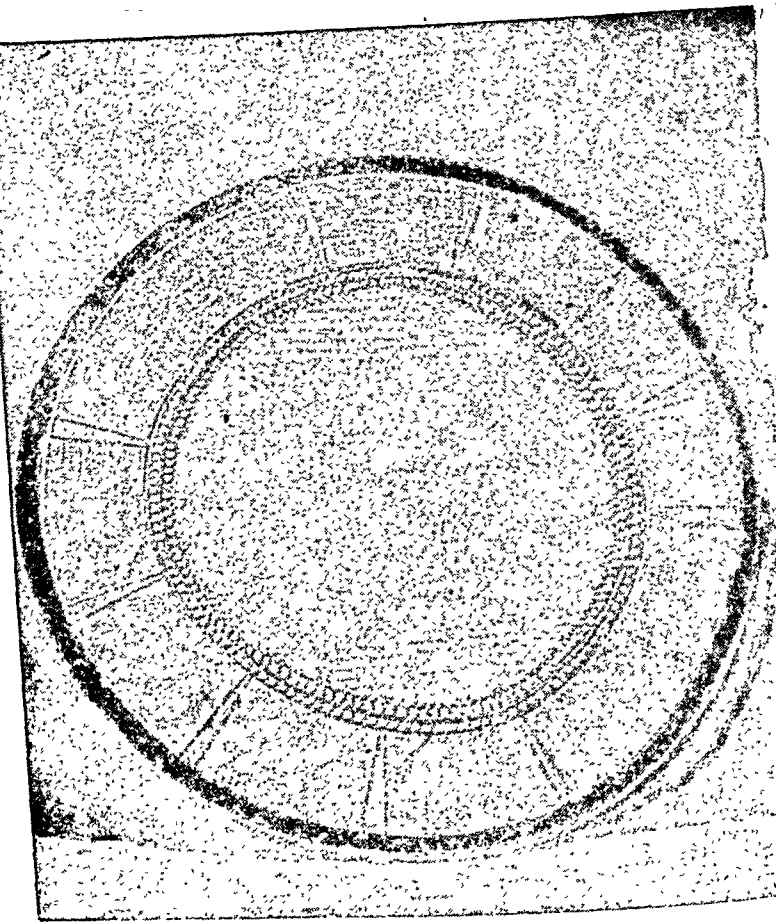
Manikut-Barpeta Satra

Carvings on the wall of the Barpeta Satra

Kevaliya Bhakat-Barpeta Satra



Sarais *of various designs: receptacle for sacred texts*



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